

# **DOES FURTHER EDUCATION MEAN BUSINESS?**

**An investigation into the impact leaders of colleges of further education in  
England believe their organisations contribute towards  
business competitiveness**

**A thesis submitted by**

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**As partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of Bolton  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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**June 2015**

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## List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

AoC	Association of Colleges
BCC	British Chambers of Commerce
BIS	Department for Business Innovation and Skills
CBI	Confederation of British Industry
CBET	Competency Based Education and Training
CIPD	Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
FE	Further Education
FEFC	Further Education Funding Council
GMCG	Greater Manchester Colleges Group
HE	Higher Education
HMSO	Her Majesty's Stationery Office
HR	Human Resources
LEA	Local Education Authority
LEP	Local Enterprise Partnership
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
LSIS	Learning and Skills Improvement Service
LSN	Learning and Skills Network
NAO	National Audit Office
OB	Organisational Behaviour
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
SE	Secondary Education
SFA	Skills Funding Agency
SME	Small/Medium-sized Enterprise
SSC	Sector Skills Council

STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TES	Times Educational Supplement
TQS	Training Quality Standard
UK	United Kingdom
UKCES	United Kingdom Commission for Employment and Skills
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WBL	Work-based Learning
YTS	Youth Training Scheme

## **Abstract**

*Key words:* Business, Competitiveness, Education, FE, Further Education, Impact, Skills, Training

Over £40 billion is invested annually in the United Kingdom by employers on business training and skills development in order to enhance the skills of the workforce and add competitive value to organisations. 216 general further education colleges in England, along with other public and private training providers contribute significantly towards this skills and training development. However, there is relatively little research that has been undertaken into investigating the impact leaders of further education colleges in England believe their organisations contribute towards business competitiveness.

Within this thesis, a literature review prepares the way for new research on this topic through exploring theory on themes such as the nature of organisations, human capital, leadership and management and staff development. An analysis of research methodology on topics such as knowledge, ethics and mixed methods leads to a research design suitable for this investigation.

Learning takes place throughout the research process. A pilot study provides the opportunity to revise questioning, understand and uncover topics of importance to leaders of further education colleges prior to the main research phase. Qualitative and quantitative analysis of respondents' feedback along with face to face discussions provides first-hand information to develop a theoretical model for the flow of further education skills delivery leading to business competitiveness.

It is proposed that contributions to knowledge and practice are made through the refinement of a theoretical research model which has the ability to be practically utilised across the sector, as well as the potential for adaptation at a further education college level. Additional contributions to knowledge and practice are also proposed.

Incremental learning is uncovered through a staged and reflective approach to research which leads to discovery of poor stakeholder communications and a lack of impact measurement issues across the sector.

Recommendations for practical improvements include more effective dialogue and stronger partnerships between stakeholders; potential for long-term cross-party planning and direction for the sector; and consideration of a consistent, national impact measure for the provision of further education college training to businesses.

Limitations of the research are discussed and recommendations for further work considered, including widening the population feedback, sharing the research with the sector to further clarify or challenge the findings, as well as using elements within this research for others to build upon and further widen the field of knowledge on this and related topics.

## Chapter 1 – Introduction to the study

### Overview

There are 336 colleges in England, of which 216 are classed as General Further Education (FE) colleges (AoC, 2014, pp.1-7). Each year, as part of their funding allocation, FE colleges receive billions of pounds worth of resources from the government in order to deliver adult skills and training, enhance employability and increase the competitiveness of businesses<sup>1</sup>.

In the UK in 2013, total employer investment in training was estimated to be £42.9 billion (UKCES, 2014a, p.12). When sourcing the provision of training and development outside their organisation, businesses most commonly look to private training providers first (UKCES, 2012, p.5). FE colleges do however have a significant role to play in providing skills and training for businesses. Figures show how, in England, 30% of employers who train externally look to the public learning landscape in the form of FE colleges and higher education institutions (ibid).

In 2004, the UK government commissioned Sandy Leitch, Chairman of the United Kingdom's (UK's) National Employment Panel to undertake an independent study and review into the UK's long-term skills needs (HM Treasury, 2006, online). Leitch published the review in 2006. Within the document, he challenged this country to be

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<sup>1</sup> For example; in 2010, the total college income was £7.5 billion (AoC, 2010, p.13), a figure which excludes the funding and income received by private and independent training providers. Within this funding, grant figures reveal employer responsive funds for 2009/2010 were initially £1,292,175,000 purely for Train to Gain and Apprenticeship funding (Denham and Balls, 2008, p.11). This was revised to £1,315,175,000 at year end (BIS, 2009a, p.10). The total employer responsive budget for 2010/2011 rose to £1,381,781,000 (ibid, p.10), which equates to almost 0.1% of the assumed 2009/10 national GDP (BCC, 2009, online). The overall investment in adult further education and skills to support 3 million-plus individuals was proposed to be £3.9 billion in the 2012/2013 Financial Year, increasing to £4.1 billion by the 2014/2015 financial year (BIS and SFA, 2012, p.15). Incentive programmes such as the Employer Ownership of Skills, Growth and Investment Fund and Employer Investment Fund are encouraging employers to drive the demand for skills, through multi-million pound investments and co-investment for employer-led skills solutions (UKCES, 2013, p.3). These figures exclude further direct investment from employers themselves.

'World Class' by 2020 and within the top 8 countries across low, intermediate and high skills levels (Leitch, 2006, p.14).

As 2015 is reached, according to the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES, 2009, p.7 and UKCES, 2010, p.5), not only are Leitch's challenges unlikely to happen; predictions show that by 2020 the UK is likely to have slipped further behind globally (see **Table 1**). A recent skills survey conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) predicted that "the talent pool of highly skilled adults in England and Northern Ireland is likely to shrink relative to that of other countries" (OECD, 2013, p.4). Not only that, whilst the ability to use technology was found to be higher than the global average, the report also found that;

"In England, adults aged 55-65 perform better than 16-24 year-olds in both literacy and numeracy. In fact, England is the only country where the oldest age group has higher proficiency in both literacy and numeracy than the youngest age group" (ibid).

	2006	2020	Ambition
Low Level Skills	17	23	Top 8
Intermediate Level Skills	18	21	Top 8
High Level Skills	12	10	Top 8
	2007	2020	Ambition
Low Level Skills	19	20	Top 8
Intermediate Level Skills	21	21	Top 8
High Level Skills	12	11	Top 8

**Table 1**  
***UK and world class skills – international ranking***  
*(UKCES, 2009, p.7 (top) and UKCES, 2010, p.5)*

Whilst this dissertation will focus on Further Education leaders' perceptions from a perspective within England, it is worth noting the above predictions for the purposes of contextualising this work. These gloomy predictions are purely based on skills levels. It is worth noting that there is some debate as to how this definition of skills is universally determined. It has been observed that skills, knowledge and qualifications

“are not identical” (Battarbee, 2012, p.9). Qualifications allow for measurement of “our skills performance and how it is changing at the time, what our needs are and how tentatively we compare with our OECD competitors in the emerging countries...They provide signals about what a potential employee is able to do” (ibid). This observation is reflected by employers who acknowledge “the benefit to staff of having recognised, transferable qualifications, but their priority has to be training that develops key competencies needed within the business. Employers choose accredited qualifications only if the programmes deliver the skills they need” (CBI and Pearson, 2013, p.44).

One Sector Skills Council<sup>2</sup> (SSC) questioned the interchangeable nature between the terms ‘qualifications’ and ‘skills’, noting that in their sector there “is a gap between the skills needed, and how these skills are recognised by government in their preferred proxy measure for skills, namely qualifications” (Lantra, 2009, pp.19 and 38). It has been noted, “further education practitioners are keenly aware that the connections between qualifications, valued skills and improved labour market outcomes for learners are highly complex” (Buddery et al, 2011, p.24). As Bennett suggests; “skills are based entirely on knowledge; they are the appropriate demonstration of knowledge...There is no “skills or knowledge.” Skills are knowledge in context” (2014, p.27).

An international benchmark, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey, was released towards the end of 2013. The PISA survey “assesses the extent to which students near the end of compulsory education have acquired key knowledge and skills that are essential for full participation in modern societies.” (OECD, 2013a, p.24). The survey is produced every three years and is a study that “has an unprecedented level of influence over global education” (Stewart, 2013, p.32).

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<sup>2</sup> Sector Skills Councils are recognised by the governments within the united Kingdom as the independent, employer-led organisations which provide the employer leadership to address skills needs within and across sectors. See online, at 4 February 2012: <http://www.sscalliance.org/Home-Public/SectorSkillsCouncils/SectorSkillsCouncils.aspx>

In England it has been highly valued by the current government as results “have been used to justify sweeping controversial reforms in England since 2010” (ibid, p.30).

PISA results show that there has been little change in the UK’s performance since the previous study. Key findings indicate that the United Kingdom;

“performs around the average in mathematics and reading and above average in science, compared with the 34 OECD countries that participated in the 2012 PISA assessment of 15-year-olds...When compared with PISA 2006 and PISA 2009, there has been no change in performance in any of the subjects tested”  
(OECD, 2013b, p.1).

These standstill results suggest that the UK “is falling behind global rivals” (Coughlan, 2013, Online). To some, the PISA findings “provide continued evidence that in English schools, overall financial resources don’t correlate with increased attainment” (Simons, 2013, Online).

When one looks at employer investment in training; both for improvements to the individuals working within the sector, as well as training focused on the needs of the individual business, a pattern of inconsistency and lack of evidence of positive economical impact can be found. A broader analysis of workforce training shows that “the leading issues on which employers would like to see progress are the business relevance of vocational qualifications (58%) and reduced bureaucracy around government funding (56%)” (CBI, 2012, p.16). This is particularly important when considering the value of employer investment on developing its workforce annually. In 2013, employers spent an estimated £3.3billion on external education and training; 13% (£440million) on fees to further education colleges and higher education, representing a significant financial investment (UKCES et al, 2014a, p.149).



There is clearly a financial investment strategy that includes contributions from the government, employer and employee at the heart of UK business skills and development thinking. The governmental FE reform plan *New Challenges, New Chances* highlighted the fact that “businesses of all sizes are crying out for people with the right skills to design, produce and sell a quality product efficiently” (Cable, 2011, p.1). Lord Heseltine’s review of ways to create wealth in the UK identified the fact that all “parts of government have a role to play in driving economic growth” (Heseltine, 2012, p.69). As a result, the following governmental skills funding statement proposed to provide Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) with “a new strategic role over skills policy” (BIS and SFA, 2012, p.3) and to work closely with employers, colleges and FE providers in order to help develop skills strategies for their areas. This proposal was rejected by the government in 2013, partly to protect national funding of apprenticeships; partly due to the fact that LEPs are not yet that well established (Lee, 2013, p.22). However, government reforms plan to hand more control of funding to employers and individuals, “using direct employer funding and the loans system” (ibid), and creating less certainty for colleges over their budgets.

Employer-focussed investment to support economic growth lay at the heart of the 2012 Richard Review of Apprenticeships. This proposed that, whilst it was right that government should continue to contribute towards the training of apprentices, “the purchasing power for training must lie firmly in the hands of employers. Employers are best placed to judge the quality and relevance of training” (Richard, 2012, p.12). As a result, proposals announced in autumn 2013 announced a planned reform to apprenticeships. Funding will be redirected from providers and move towards a new system. This will be a transformational system that the government believes “will put business at the centre of the apprenticeship system by enabling employers to receive funding for the training costs of apprentices directly” (HM Treasury, 2013, p.55).

This proposal has many critics. There are suggestions that the proposal is misguided; one that potentially may derail vocational skills training due to the bureaucracy, funding and inspection businesses would face, as well as the fact that it ignores a system whereby providers recruit 90% of apprentices directly, rather than employers voluntarily requesting them (Hyde, 2014, Online). Some feel that there “is a strong feeling that these reforms will split the current apprenticeship provision in two” (Humphreys, 2014, p.2); with employers unwilling to invest in less technical apprenticeship routes. The government disagrees, claiming its reforms “will not only empower employers and incentivise them to demand higher quality and more relevant training for their apprentices, but will also dramatically simplify the funding rules and processes” (HM Government, 2014, p.6).

Whilst accepting that change often polarises opinions, one would imagine that reforms to a system that could improve the skills for individuals and economic competitiveness for employers would have been praised by all. Perhaps, within the journey of the reform process itself, effective or full stakeholder communications may not have taken place, resulting in a lack of clarity, understanding and support from all those who must agree in order to support success?

Some who reflect on governmental reforms that aim to provide employers with more ownership and control over their training suggest that a problem exists because “employers and government mean different things by employer ownership. For government, it means taking away power from providers and giving it to employers. For employers, it means taking power away from government with a capital G.” (Fletcher, 2014, Online). As a result, Fletcher suggests, the system is prone to failure due to the fact that government only vocally transfers ownership, whilst wishing to retain control over duration, nature of qualifications and elements within requirements, whether employers require them or not, frustrating employers who wish to take true

ownership and at the same time marginalising providers and their representative voices (ibid).

The government believes that “Britain has lost ground in the world’s economy and needs to catch up” (BIS, 2011b, p.3). Some reflect that after “years of inadequate investment in skills, infrastructure and innovation, there are longstanding structural weaknesses in the economy” (LSE, 2013, p.1). Further education has been recognised by the government as a sector that can address this;

“Those who lead and teach in the further education (FE) and skills sector play a crucial role in serving people and employers in their communities and raising educational and skills levels – thereby directly supporting both economic development and social mobility”.

(BIS, 2014, p.4)

Across sectors, there has appeared for some time to be an emerging workforce lacking in leadership and management skills at all levels (for example: BIS/UKCES, 2009, p.38; Asset Skills, 2009, p.4). Over 150 separate leadership and management issues were highlighted in an employer review linked to Sector Skills agreements (Hender, 2009, p.28) as well as a general lack in the minimum essentials across all levels of business structures that it is assumed are necessary for any business to survive – for example; communication, inter-personal and other generic skills (LSC, 2007, p.26).

As the UK emerges from “the worst downturn since the Great Depression” (Elliott, 2010, p.11), the timing is clearly appropriate for a review of thinking regarding investment in and allocation of resources for businesses in England. In April 2010, the government dissolved the Learning and Skills Council, the organisation that was created in 2001 as:

a publicly-funded organisation that exists to make England better skilled and more competitive...ensure(ing) that learning and skills are at the heart of local and regional economic development and community regeneration.

(Learning and Skills Council, 2009, p.9)

In its place, two organisations emerged. One was the adult-focused Skills Funding Agency (SFA), which is responsible for the National Apprenticeship Service, the Employer Skills Services, the Adult Enhancement and Careers Service and the Learner Skills Services (BIS, 2009b, p.4). The other was the Education Funding Agency, which is responsible for delegating 0-19 year old funding. In 2011, the SFA became the lead body for funding agreement, performance management, audit and intervention in general colleges of further education (SFA, 2011a, p.1). For the sector as a whole, it can only be hoped that this move will prove to be an enlightened, strategically-focused deployment of resources, rather than, as previous interventions have been referred to, “a masterpiece of bureaucratic muddle” (TES, 2008, Online) and “a bureaucratic mess” (Lee, 2010, p1). During 2010-2011 over 265,000 employers received training that was supported through the SFA (Skills Funding Agency, 2014, p.1). In 2012, key findings from an employer satisfaction survey found that private sector providers consistently attracted the highest ratings from employers, with ratings “generally lower for FE and special colleges” (ibid, p.2).

The role of a further education college leader involved in anticipating, interpreting and implementing government strategies can sometimes contain difficulties for forward planning. There are many government-led and national strategies which have as their goal positive aims for individuals. Often these can become distracted or diluted by constant amendments or redefining of the targets and aims, sometimes for political reasons. Consequently, many good intentions become reduced or lost before their

potential has been able to be realised. To some in the further education sector, there is an opinion that there is a constant tinkering with policy that shies away from “tackling the real problems holding back further education” (in Pattni, 2008, Online).

There is a suggestion that communications and relationships between FE colleges and employers have room to develop. A 2010 survey found that just 23% of respondents (equivalent to 14% of all employers) used FE colleges as their main training provider and that a decline in FE usage is emerging (UKCES, 2011b, p.140). This may be due to the fact that “many employers are put off by a system that appears bewilderingly complex and excessively centralised” (UKCES, 2011a, p.2). An online tool, launched by Ofsted<sup>3</sup> in 2014 for employers, aims in part to help improve clarity. The intent of the tool is to improve dialogue between employers and further education providers and allow employers to be able to “rate providers on a number of measures including the quality of their communication, monitoring of employee progress and training provision” (Exley, 2014, p.47). Whilst FE colleges are “fundamental” (Skills Commission, 2013, p.16) to the government’s growth agenda, relationships between FE colleges, employers and government are changing, and need to adapt further in order for growth to succeed (ibid).

Within this context, this thesis will aim to investigate and challenge the contribution leaders in colleges of FE in England believe their organisations contribute towards business competitiveness. The researcher is currently an FE college Director who has worked within educational roles across several organisations and has worked for over 19 years within further education colleges. The researcher’s FE college managerial roles have included responsibility for development, project funding, communications

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<sup>3</sup> Ofsted is the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills. It is an independent and impartial inspectorial and regulatory body that reports directly to Parliament. See Online 25 May 2014 at: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/>

and marketing. It should be noted that, although the researcher works within the field of further education and has an interest and commitment to the research topic, the aim of this proposal will be to remain impartial. The results, findings and conclusions drawn within this thesis will be evidenced in a balanced and ethical manner.

As part of this research there will be a determined effort to understand whether there is any positive or negative impact of so many apparent short-term adjustments to government strategy. As has been noted, the FE sector's "enduring ability to realign and refocus itself as successive ministers shift the goalposts is testament to the hard work of staff in colleges" (Hunt, 2011, p.8). This constant shift can appear both confusing and wasteful. Some colleges "spend tens of thousands of pounds a year on training and consultants to ensure that staff are up to date on constantly changing rules and regulations" (Exley, 2012, p.55).

There is a possibility that a political dimension or interference within FE may be identified as one of the key barriers to delivering skills that meet business need. If this is the case, there may be a need to consider reform or adopt a long-term, consistent national direction. A failure in this area could inevitably result in political, short-termism with creation of departments to suit the focus-group opinion of the day or current politician in favour. This would be a missed opportunity and simply reaffirm the long-held beliefs "that machinery of government changes distract ministers and civil servants with 'rearranging the deck chairs' instead of getting on with the job." (Hallsworth, White and Halpern, 2009, p.22).

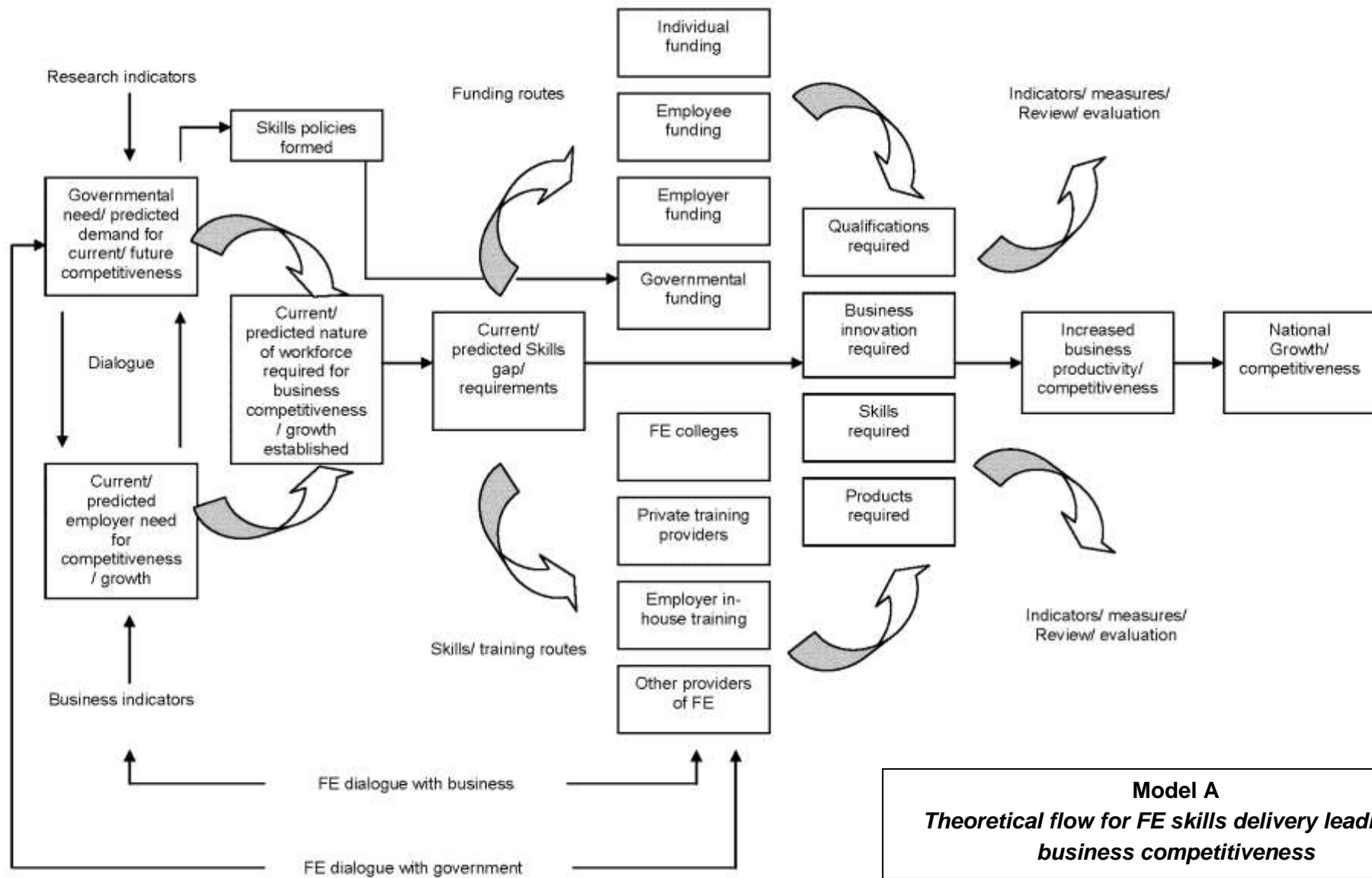
### **Focus and context**

It is anticipated that this research will lead to a quantitative and qualitative analysis of several issues related to FE leaders' perceptions of the impact colleges of further education in England have on businesses competitiveness. The exploration of

communication and relationship developments by FE colleges, as well as the match between business needs and the range of courses/products offered by colleges will be looked at. A consideration will be made as to whether the availability of business funding support for areas of FE delivery influences the nature of the offer available or the take-up by businesses. Evidence to support the nature of impact on business competitiveness will be considered and reviewed.

The initial study model proposed (**Model A**) will be one of analysis based on feedback from key individuals currently involved in the FE-employer supply chain and will focus on interpreting responses and opinions from those directly involved. It will seek to understand, from FE leaders' perspectives how government policy influences FE supply of skills and whether that supply not only meets the needs and demands of employers and businesses, but also delivers benefits to increase their competitiveness. FE colleges are being encouraged to adopt more strategies for improving employer engagement, including listening instead of selling, appearing more commercial and being more sophisticated in personalising communications (FERSG, 2011, pp.1-4). A consideration regarding issues that impact upon employers will be made, as well as an exploration around constraints that may exist with respect to the provision that FE colleges can offer.

Consideration will also be made as to the measures the government is using to steer FE college provision and the impact in achieving them may make to businesses and the economy in England. This was questioned by the Coalition government. It is "moving from qualification-based provider funding to employer based investments and loans" (UKCES, 2011a, p.6), partly as an incentive to employers to take ownership for the skills of their workforce, and partly to make employers determine the nature of the skills training they are investing in. Up to £250 million of public sector investment is being invested in an *Employer Ownership Pilot*. This Pilot will "test the potential to



**Model A**  
*Theoretical flow for FE skills delivery leading to business competitiveness*



raise businesses' engagement and investment, by routing public investment directly to businesses, rather than through FE colleges and training providers" (BIS, 2011a, p.10).

The Learning and Skills Network (LSN) identified the fact that employers "will pay for services if there is a clear relationship between perceived benefits to their businesses performance and/or the bottom line and what providers offer" (Learning and Skills Network, 2010, p.1). The direction of government policy on providers and the realities of funding cuts mean that the FE sector will need support. In order to make the transition to a necessary business model which substantially increases the proportion of their income from co-funded or full cost recovery work with employers, providers may need to re-evaluate their provision, services and understanding of businesses (ibid, pp.1-2).

This research therefore will seek to understand FE leaders' perception of the impact of the initiatives and activity delivered by their colleges to businesses in England from their unique and personal viewpoints, as well as look at how they reach their conclusions that relate to impact.

Having discussed and reviewed the previous issues, it is anticipated that the answers and conclusions drawn will allow for evidence-based, refinements of the model for consideration and further discussion. The conclusions drawn should evidence FE leaders' perceived strengths and weaknesses in the current system. They may also suggest recommendations for continuity, changes or a paradigm shift in this country's approach to and structure of the FE college/employer relationship from the perspective of achieving business competitiveness.

In order to effectively focus this research on FE leaders and their perceptions, the perspectives of employer, government, and wider agencies on this topic will be

referenced from FE leaders' viewpoints. Direct analysis of wider agency perspectives, whilst valuable, could also dilute the FE leader focus of this research and reduce its impact. It is recognised that this may be viewed as a strength as well as a limitation within this research; however, it is anticipated that there will be opportunities at this work's conclusion for future researchers to build on some of the viewpoints and conclusions drawn from FE leaders and take the research into further directions. It should also be noted that the purpose of this research model is not to directly seek to determine a financial return on monetary investment made, although finance and funding may be referred to as a result of the issues discussed. Some studies already exist that seek to determine a financial return on investment<sup>4</sup>. Others evidence the fact that, for the individual, "education and skills acquisition result in improved labour market outcomes that persist for many years post attainment" (BIS, 2013, p.11).

Before commencing a literature review that considers organisational structure, leadership and management, human capital, business competitiveness and market forces, all of which have a fundamental bearing on business competitiveness, some detail about the sector at the heart of this work will be provided.

## **Further Education**

The Learning and Skills Council defined further education (FE) as an area:

"that provided for those over the age of compulsory education (currently 16) where the course is started before the age of 19. FE does not include provision from within a school that also

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<sup>4</sup> As examples, see (EMSI, 2014, p. 5 ) which suggests that the added income created by the college and its learners is equal to 0.5% of the total economic output of Cheshire & Warrington, representing roughly 4,839 average wage jobs. In addition, see (BIS, 2011c, p.31) which suggests that the net present value of a governmental investment of £3.1billion in 2008-2009 is worth a current economic value of £75billion based on the qualification achievements of individuals and the years that they will remain in the workforce. The research suggests that this equates to a return per £1 of investment of approximately £35-40 for an Apprenticeship or Vocational qualification (ibid, p.5). See also (SQW Consulting, 2009, p.1) which looks at the turnover of colleges in the North West of England. The report measures the output to the economy and estimated gross value added contribution in terms of expenditure and work undertaken once qualifications have been achieved.

provides Secondary Education (SE) or where the particular aim is considered Higher Education (HE)”  
(Learning and Skills Council, 2008, Online).

This closely mirrors the statutory definition of FE, which, according to the *Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009* (HMSO, 2009, p.10) remains as defined in the *Education Act 1996*:

“full-time and part-time education suitable to the requirements of persons who are over compulsory school age (including vocational, social, physical and recreational training), and organised leisure-time occupation provided in connection with the provision of such education, except that it does not include secondary education or...higher education.”  
(HMSO, 1996, p.2)

Opinions and reflections on FE as a sector are varied. In January 2010, there were 353 further education establishments/colleges in England (AoC and BIS, 2010, p.6), ranging from large tertiary establishments delivering a vast range of curricula across many levels of study to learners as diverse as pre-16s, post-compulsory educational students, community learners, overseas learners, learners with specialised and unique needs, etc; to niche colleges specialising in a very narrow range of curricula (e.g. land-based or performing arts); to sixth form colleges and to specially designated colleges. This figure had reduced, primarily through mergers, to 351 colleges in England at April 2011 (AoC, 2011, p.6), 345 at February 2012 (AoC, 2012b, p.5) and 339 at August 2013 (AoC, 2013, pp.1-5).

Finding agreed definitions of FE that fit into this wide spectrum without being as broadly generic as the above definitions is problematic. A study on the efficiency and productivity within FE noted that the position of FE as a potential driver of the economy

and within government policy was important as “the FE sector, as a provider of the academic and vocational skills required by the labour market, is key to achieving the Government’s education and training targets.” (Bradley, Johnes and Little, 2010, p.2). A perceptive study notes that due to the non-standardisation and development of a predominantly local function and service that FE fulfils, attempting to succinctly label or define FE is something of a problem as its “very diversity makes it difficult to pin down” (Lumby, 2001, p.2). In November 2004, Sir Andrew Foster “was invited by the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, and Chair of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) to carry out an independent review of the future role of FE colleges” (BIS, 2010c, Online). He agreed that “FE colleges play an absolutely essential role in just about every part of the education and skills world” (Foster, 2005, p.5) but argued the case that the UK needed an “FE college system – not sector – for the future...a coherent system that responds to learner, societal and economic needs” (Ibid, p.2). The response of the government to this research resulted in the White Paper *Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances* which agreed with the societal and economic proposal put forward by Sir Andrew, using the terms ‘system’ and ‘sector’ almost interchangeably throughout the text (DfES, 2006, pp.21 and 33 for example).

In the years that have followed the publication of this White Paper, as further strategies and initiatives have been introduced, delivery that takes place within FE has been increasingly referred to as *Learner Responsive* or *Employer Responsive*, (the focus on responsiveness underlying much of the Foster-inspired White Paper). This may arguably be in part to move towards a more ‘demand-led’ system of education.

The focus on employability and an economic mission for FE within the White Paper is significant. The intention within the strategy of the White Paper is for FE to provide “the general education that employers value and the stepping stone provision that helps prepare people for success in life and work” (ibid, p.20). This would enable the

sector/system to have a “strong focus on economic impact” (ibid, p.29) delivered through a system that meets the needs of learners and employers (ibid, p.33). Employability is seen as a priority for businesses. A study undertaken when the coalition government came to power in 2010 showed that 70% of employers wanted the government “making the employability skills of young people its top education priority” (CBI and EDI, 2010, p.10)

Under the Coalition government, in 2011 a review into vocational education, *The Wolf Report* was conducted. There were recommendations within the report for a closer relationship between employers and providers of vocational education. This took the aspirations of the 2006 White Paper further, encouraging a concept of greater shared ownership of employability between the individual, the employer and the state. A major objective was for institutions to maintain close links with employers and “to recreate and strengthen genuine links between vocational education and the labour market” (Wolf, 2011, p.143). This included a commitment to a shared involvement in shaping the nature of the training. An investigation was recommended to consider “whether and how both national employer bodies – including but not only SSCs – and local employers should contribute to qualification design” (ibid, p.17). Among the issues highlighted in a research report conducted by one such body, the North West Business Leadership Team<sup>5</sup>, there was found to be evidence of: complexities and frequent change in the education system; a lack of a coherent skills strategy; difficulty amongst employers in identifying the most appropriate training providers; poor communication between employers and training providers. The report urged measures to tackle these issues to “greatly simplify and streamline the system” (NWBLT, 2013, pp.2-3).

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<sup>5</sup> The North West Business Leadership Team is an independent group of influential business leaders, who work together to promote the sustainable economic development and long-term well-being of North West England. See <http://www.nwblt.com/>

The existence of the FE sector/system, sandwiched between, and to some extent overlapping, the Secondary and Higher Education sectors often polarises views and opinions regarding not just its effectiveness or responsiveness, but also its existence and value. To some, FE is a sector that is “vital to this country’s prosperity” (Rammell, 2006, p.2) and “the nucleus in the education eco-system” (Steria, 2007, p.2), whereas to others it is merely a “hopeless...burdensome label” (Kingston, 2008, p.8), an anomaly whose existence, due to the proposed extended staying-on rate of 18 years of age by 2015 in the UK, would be better off removed, (presumably to be replaced by something else)?

It is possible that the diversity of provision provided by FE colleges (provision that, amongst other things can include courses for 14 year olds, A Levels, apprenticeships, commercial courses, and community courses) could contribute towards a lack of understanding of the skills contribution it may play. FE colleges impact upon the skills delivery of much of society. For those uncertain as to the responsibility FE colleges have, it is estimated that “three million people study in FE colleges in any given year: one in 20 of the entire population. And if there’s a link between skills and growth...then it might conceivably be a good idea to start taking an interest in the bodies that do most of the up-skilling” (Elledge, 2014, Online).

As a move to demonstrate the effectiveness of the FE sector, there have been some recent attempts to evidence and measure the benefits of its positive contribution towards the economy. The Greater Manchester Colleges Group (GMCG) produced a study quantifying the monetary value of the impact it made on key stakeholders (learners, taxpayers and the local community). Among its conclusions was the finding that the economic contribution of GMCG member colleges to the local business community in the Greater Manchester Area is £3.1 billion each year. (EMSI, 2014a, p.6). An economic contribution study of 55 FE colleges in England was conducted to

analyse financial returns from 2006-2007. From a cost-modelling perspective, it did conclude that there were positive results to the economy of FE college training. It concluded that qualified learners contributed to the national economy and that there was “a benefit/cost ratio of 1.7 (every pound of tax money invested in the colleges by the UK government today returns £1.70)” (EMSI, 2008, p.6). A report for the government led by Cambridge Econometrics concluded that, based on FE participation funding in 2008-2009, Apprenticeships and vocational qualifications delivered in the workplace offered a return of “around £35 - £40 per pound of funding” (BIS, 2011c, p.5).

Reports evidencing the value of the sector, as shown above, are important. The potential of the FE sector is, in many ways yet to be realised. A strong FE sector is recognised by the government as “fundamental to social mobility, re-opening routes from people from wherever they begin to succeed in work” (BIS, 2010a, p.3). As a result of the current economic downturn, FE colleges, along with all other sections of the sector, “are being asked to become more effective advocates for their own value beyond the narrow boundaries of ‘plan and provide’” (Buddery, et al, 2011, p.5).

It is interesting to note that, regardless of individual positions as to the merits or otherwise of FE, it has in recent years significantly raised its profile. In the researcher's own study ten years ago, finding a reasonable definition for the FE sector proved to be somewhat elusive (Maykels, 2005, p.9) but further debate seems to suggest that FE's days as the “Cinderella sector could soon be numbered” (Hook, 2007, Online). The profile and potential significance of FE as a driver for education and skills is stronger now than at most times in recent memory. Whilst acknowledging the range of opinion and passion regarding FE as a sector, realistically, whether it continues for the foreseeable future under its current terminology, whether it merges, is renamed or indeed removed, the educational relationship that its service provides as an interface

between and supplier to business in England will continue, and therefore the research, progression and concepts within this research will remain of relevance.

The next chapter will begin to draw together the nature of business, competitiveness and the role of the FE sector. This will be looked at through an in-depth literature study regarding the nature and structure of organisations. It is anticipated that this review will highlight potential areas for further analysis.



## **Chapter 2 - Literature review**

Before any meaningful conclusions and recommendations relevant towards this research can be considered, it will be necessary to understand the issues contributing towards organisational competitiveness. For the research to be appropriately guided, a clear understanding of the nature of organisations and the importance of skilled, motivated individuals within them is needed. This will allow for an understanding and context of the role and impact colleges of Further Education (FE) could have upon businesses in England and for potential practical applications to be considered from a review of theoretical perspectives.

This literature review will look at current and previous theories and arguments across topics related to this study, such as the nature and structure of organisations, the impact of business competitiveness, the role further education has or continues to play in developing competitive businesses and the issues that emerge from this consideration. It is anticipated that the literature review will highlight potential strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for research direction.

Before considering the issues regarding business competitiveness it is important first of all to understand the nature of organisations themselves and the complexity of their structure. It is through an understanding of such complexity that the researcher can begin to consider management practices and style, business evolution, market forces and positioning of products and ultimately the skills resources that may be necessary; not just to survive but to gain the competitive edge and thrive.

It is anticipated that the evidence presented here will lead to a contextualisation of the development of organisations and practices and their impact on current and future business competitiveness.

### **The nature and structure of organisations**

Theoretical definitions of an organisation are continuously evolving, and are commonly focused around the structural relationships between the one and the many. The concept of the social inter-relationship between individuals and the structured, often psychological bureaucracy of an organisation flows throughout the literature. This inter-relationship concept has been defined through viewing organisations as “bound-bed systems of structured social interactions featuring the use of incentives, communication systems, and authority relations” (Sims, 2002, p.2), i.e., a system where the inter-dependency of individuals relies much more than simply on a hierarchical structure for its success.

Whilst the size, structure, make-up or purpose of an organisation can vary, a common defining theme is that organisations exist when a group of individuals “become organized into a social unit...established for the explicit purpose of achieving certain goals” (Blau and Scott, 1962, p.1). It has been noted that “for most organisations, a high degree of goals consensus is important for achieving coherent action” (Eden and Ackermann, 2013, p.10). This organisational importance of goals is highlighted by others who state that goals “are internal psychological representations of desired states which can be defined as outcomes, events or processes” (Mitchell, Thompson and George-Falvy, 2000, p.217).

As goals play such a large part in determining purposeful action, from an organisational perspective it makes commercial sense to motivate individuals via goal-setting that not only fulfils organisational needs, but the individual’s ones too. Johnson Jr and Fauske

(2005, p.6). build on the premise of inter-dependency between the organisation and the individuals who work within it by noting that organisations “provide the principal mechanism for realizing ends beyond the reach of the individual.” Further value is added to the concept of an interrelation between the organisation and the individual by noting that, in addition to the welfare of society relying on the fact that organisations function effectively, the quality of individuals’ life also depends on it (Anderson et al, 2001, p.2). An additional perspective recognises that “goals do not have to belong to only an individual, department, or organisation, but rather can be more encompassing of multi-organisational possibilities to ensure that in these times of austerity and economic turbulence more effective working can be achieved” (Eden and Ackermann, 2013, p.25). Considering these viewpoints in relation to a possible role for a college of Further Education within this organisational/individual inter-dependency, it becomes clear that aspiring to a knowledgeable, motivated workforce would work towards everyone’s advantage.

From a commercial and business perspective, this notion of the close dependency on an organisation’s success on the effective motivation and interaction of its individuals is worth recognising. As has been noted; “where the needs of the individual and the demands of the organisation are incompatible, this can result in frustration and conflict” (Mullins, 1993, p.3). Pace acknowledges this and the transformational power that organisational investment in employees can bring; “those organizations that invest in the growth and development of their employees (positively) transform the personality and character of their organization” (2002, p.xiv). It is noted by others that the growth of the power of the customer and consumer enhances the dimension of organisation and individual throughout the literature. For some this is qualified by asserting that the success of an organisation “depends on managing three sets of expectations. They are: organisational expectations; employee expectations; and customer expectations” (Kermally, 2005, p.2). Others assert that the power of the customer is of such key to

an organisation's success that all employees should "think like a customer" (Albrecht, 1992, p.117). All employees, Albrecht suggests, from the most important executive to the front-line employee, need "to have the skill of "other-worldliness," i.e., the orientation to understand and really appreciate how things look and feel to the customer" (ibid). This thinking puts greater perspective onto the idea of how little value hierarchical, or indeed any company structure is, if the whole organisation does not have the needs of the customer relationship at its heart. Thompson notes that awareness of this and positive management and understanding of customer business expectations can make all the difference to organisational success or failure;

"When a company wishes to compete on something other than product or price, it may do an enterprisewide analysis of its business processes to identify interactions...that could be levered to create high customer value, differentiating itself on process or service value to customers. Companies may have the highest priced service or product, but thrive nonetheless because of the customer-perceived value."

(Thompson, 2000, p.72)

It therefore follows that in order for organisations to effectively evolve, grow and flourish, the psychological needs of the individual (for example their aspirations, sense of fulfilment and personal motivations), as well as an understanding of the expectations and influence of the external customer are essential. To be truly successful, effective communication is required.

Communication plays an important role in helping an organisation grow and flourish. Careful consideration should be made regarding how an organisation communicates and develops its relationships with its customers. Development of interpersonal relationships through communicating effectively with individuals, both internal and

external, is “an essential part of organisational life and sustainable success...Effective communication builds relationships” (Dasgupta, et al, 2013, p.173).

It has been recognised that clear and consistent communication within organisations is critical to managing change, (Enriquez, et al, 2001, p.122). The structure of an organisation and the systems within, if handled poorly “can contribute to distorted or incorrect communication about organisational affairs, leading to incorrect decision-making and frustrate the realisation of organisational goals” (Hoogervorst, et al, 2004, p.297).

Effective, consistent external communication is as important as effective internal communication. There is evidence that the communication style provided by service providers is directly related to customer satisfaction (Webster and Sundaram, 2009, pp.104-105). It has been suggested that:

“Customers should feel that the firm which communicates with them shows a genuine interest in them and their needs, requirements and value systems and in a convincing way argues for products, services or other elements of the total offering. Furthermore, they should see that the firm appreciates feedback and makes use of it.”

(Gronroos, 2004, p.107).

Interestingly, there are those who observe that the reverse is also possible. A customer who is satisfied and communicates that information may indirectly affect employee satisfaction “by affecting the perceived appreciation the employee receives from the customer” (Frey et al, 2013, p.503). In this way, a positive customer-employee relationship can add to an employee’s personal level of satisfaction, having potential benefits not just for the individual concerned, but for the organisation as well.

The nature of an organisation's communications will also be strongly influenced by organisational culture. An organisation "does not precede communication, nor is it produced by it...It emerges in it", (Taylor and Van Every, 2000, p.104). For some, the study of organisations "is more akin, philosophically, to the study of history than to the study of the physical sciences, that there are no precise and verifiable and unvarying laws governing the behaviour of people" (Handy, 1993, p.376). It is therefore possible to acknowledge the sheer diversity that can be found across organisational structures, cultures and make-up, and note that although one can analyse with hindsight, it is rarely possible to accurately predict organisational decisions.

Building on the suggestion that we now live in an organisational society dominated by huge scale operations, "highly centralized policy control, and the resulting bureaucratic management practices (e.g., control from the top down)" (Prethus, 1962, p.67), it has been asserted that an organisation "is itself a cultural phenomenon" (Morgan, 1986, p.112) i.e. an evolution of its time and place in the society within which it exists, and that this phenomenon "varies according to a society's stage of development" (ibid). This organisational form of natural selection being the case, it is relatively simple to understand how the environment and period in time within which an organisation exists is as much influential in determining its nature and make-up as its management, customers and influencers. This also presents regular opportunities for a culturally-attuned organisation to benefit from. If the workforce and direction is regularly focussed, effectively communicated with, updated and re-skilled to adapt to the cultural and mood changes in the outside world; a competitive advantage can be gained, or at least anticipated. Outside assistance that supports, guides or transforms workforce skills in order to continually remain relevant could be one route for such an organisation to consider. It is a small step to see how colleges of Further Education could have a role in supporting and developing this organisational competitiveness.

Aligning the consideration of organisations being both a cultural product of their time, as well as an amalgamation of the various needs and wishes of all the individuals involved within the supply chain, can have the effect of making leaders and decision-makers wonder sometimes who or what is actually driving the organisation forward. It has been suggested that whilst most organisational leaders “would like to believe that they’re in charge of their organizations” (Christensen, 1997, p.101), it is in fact “a company’s customers who effectively control what it can and cannot do” (ibid). This does not mean that leaders are powerless to influence decision-making, evolution or change; simply that the methods they must take in order to effect change need careful consideration. Organisational evolution through innovation, Christensen suggests, is difficult if the idea of change would impact upon the existing satisfactory customer-relationship. Solutions focussing on “emerging customers” (ibid, p.103), possibly through the set-up of a separate-company or division tend to be the most successful ones. When the competitive edge for an organisation may lie not in how successful it is with today’s customers, but on how it is positioned for the customers of tomorrow, the importance of effectively-trained leaders and a highly-skilled workforce is clear.

### **Organisational theory**

It is interesting to see how organisational theory also follows an evolutionary path, on occasions even revisiting the past in order to develop or refashion previously challenged or lapsed concepts. In the first half of the twentieth century there was much study regarding the nature of organisations, often referred to as classical, rational or scientific approaches that revolved around predicting productivity and output by determining levels of power, bureaucracy, systemisation and control. This section presents a brief overview of organisational theory. This overview will lead onto an understanding regarding the nature of how organisations work and are structured. It is also an opportunity to understand the nature of how important skilled, motivated and

focussed individuals and the workforce are towards having a positive impact upon organisational productivity.

Taylor was convinced that the remedy to his perceived problem of organisational inefficiency could be solved by “systematic management” and that this management was “a true science” (Taylor, 1911, p.3). He constructed principles of scientific management around this. There was an understanding that maximisation of profit and an organisation’s best interest would follow if the maximum prosperity of the management as well as the worker was secured. This would be achieved by having those individuals who were intelligent enough to plan, systematically breaking down tasks into their most simple, repetitive and thereby *efficient* form, but at the almost total elimination of the free-will, thought and personality of the individual worker. From time to time, phases of the Tayloristic form reappear in organisational thinking. For example, productivity thinking in the late 1970s that called for an analysis “of all the jobs in the organization, eliminating wasted effort, simplifying them when possible...Taylorism, updated with a certain sensitivity to the feelings of the workers” (Albrecht, 2003, p75). More significantly than the occasional reappearance of Taylorism; authors have argued that Taylor’s principles of management are “alive and ready for the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Hodgetts and Greenwood, 1995, p.222) and that his principles still hold value for those organisations seeking to improve their competitiveness. It has also been argued that concepts such as total quality management are really concepts championed by Taylor decades ago (ibid). Towards the end of the twentieth century, support was added to this debate, with the suggestion that Taylor’s concepts remain “a tool for greater productivity, greater purchasing power, a higher standard of living” (Bedeian, 1998, p.7) and that Taylor’s ideas still bear relevance for today’s managers (ibid, p.8).



Whereas Taylor focused on systemisation, Max Weber questioned the nature of compliance between managers and subordinates and how it was that organisational commands were followed. He emphasised the importance of bureaucracy, administration and a clear-cut hierarchy and division of labour. Weber identified varying forms of authority (traditional, charismatic and rational) and outlined how these forms of control could be recognised as legitimate by subordinates. Relating Weber to more contemporary considerations; there have been reflections on Weber's sociological and economic thinking from the viewpoint of the motivational self-interest of the individual (Swedberg, 1998, p23). Developing Weber's thinking, Swedberg asserts that an individual may actually be driven more by self-interest rather than acceptance of authority as this means they are "driven primarily by his or her interests" (ibid). Whilst, from an organisational perspective, this self-interest can often be material (salary, for example), it can nevertheless be idealistic or emotional too.

There has been much contemporary thinking regarding the constraints and necessity of bureaucracy, certainly in a Weberian context. These ideas are varied and range from ideas of transformative recoding of the bureaucratic DNA within public systems (Osborne, 2007, p.19) to suggestions that bureaucracy could be "made smaller" by redistributing layers to those who may have innovative incentives for improving it (Etheridge and Handleman, 2010, pp.283-284). Others believe that it is not bureaucracy *per se* that is an issue, rather it is organisational dysfunctionality, disorder, poor design and bad management – in other words *bad* bureaucracy (Aucoin, 1997, pp.290-306). Some believe, or at least acknowledge, that "no democratic society can preserve itself without a professional bureaucracy" (Suleiman, 2006, p.7) and that "Weber's principle injunctions about bureaucratic competence, bureaucratic neutrality and an efficacious state are indispensable requirements for a democratic state" (ibid, p.16).

In more recent times, the term *New Public Management* has been used, not necessarily to replace the term *bureaucracy* within the public sector, but perhaps to deflect from some of the negative perceptions regarding bureaucracy. The concept aspires to decentralise bureaucratic practices through replacing public administration with public management (Larbi, 1999, p.iv) and attempts to improve the public sector through the importation of business concepts and a revised customer-focus through leaner structures and output related performance (e.g.: Pollitt, 2007, p.110; Newton and van Deth, 2005, p.129, Denhardt and Denhardt, 2007, p.130-133, et al). There is no evidence that *New Public Management* is better or worse than the bureaucratic practices it is attempting to replace (Pollitt, 2007, p.112). In many ways it merely displaces some bureaucratic functions, substituting public bureaucracies for private ones and “creating institutions that are more difficult to control and oversee” (Meier and Hill, 2005, p.55).

Henri Fayol contributed towards organisational thinking from a different perspective. Fayol’s thinking had a strong focus on the principles of management and its relationship to the organisation and organisational objectives (Fayol, 1949) and it has been suggested that his thinking and “views on human relationships at work anticipated some of the basic findings of industrial psychology” (Cuthbert, 1970, pp.108-139). Fayol considered the establishment of objectives and policies to be an “integral part of the process of management, and a necessary function in every organisation” (Mullins, 1993, p.280), with the elements of management being planning, organising, command, co-ordination and control (ibid, pp.368-369). Fayol’s thinking (1956) also had a focus on discipline within the structural processes of planning, organisation and coordination and the levels to which it was dependent on the personal authority of management. Fayol is considered by many to be “a pioneer in presenting a broad conception of organisational and national planning” (Sapru, 2008, p.122) with ideas on planning and management that remain relevant today (ibid; Callender, 2009, p.58; Fells, 2000,

p.347, et al). Fayol's model and thinking regarding functional organisation has been considered to be "still the best way to structure a small business, especially a small manufacturing business" (Drucker, 1974, p.441). Others agree with Fayol's continuing relevance, arguing that Fayol deserves to be recognised as a "contemporary management thinker and philosopher" (Parker and Ritson, 2005, p.192) and that his approach to planning, control and strategic management is of considerable relevance to managers today (ibid). Relating this to strategic planning and the cultural aspects of organisational inter-relationships today, there remains the need within a managerial structure for a clearly communicated sense of purpose and direction, authority to be recognised, and for procedures and processes to be understood and implemented. Much of the success and effectiveness of hierarchical and organisational relationships comes not necessarily from an agreed subservience to authority, but from an understanding, through effective training and skills development, of an individual's place and worth within an organisational structure.

As the twentieth century progressed, new concepts and theories regarding organisations and effectiveness emerged. Some critics of the systematic approaches towards organisational thinking considered that these approaches assumed all people behaved in the same way and that there was no room within these approaches for human relations or the behaviour of people (e.g. Crowther and Green, 2004, p.35; Beardwell and Holden, 2001, p.180).

Mayo, reflecting on a national fatigue in the workforce as a result of repetitive and prolonged demand for industrial supplies to support the war effort, highlighted a partial failure to sustain this demand as an "ignorance of the human conditions of sustained production" (Mayo, 1933, p.4). His work, along with Roethlisberger and others, within experiments in the 1920s at the Hawthorne plant of the United States Western Electrical Company looked at changing environmental variables on the workforce.

During his studies he noted how informal groups would emerge within structured work groups as a natural way of social and group solidarity (Beardwell and Holden, 2001, p.191). Despite tests on the group being studied including differing variables such as poor lighting, shorter working hours, piece-work, rest-pauses, reverting to the original set-up; it was noted that productivity continued to increase. Mayo was able to draw conclusions that, due to an interest being shown in their work, the attitudes of those being studied had changed. Conclusions were drawn that the informal group itself had perceived an apparent importance in their work through the act of being studied and that it was this which had contributed to the collective drive to do better (Ashton, 1970, p.101; Dransfield, 2000, p.16). In this case, despite adverse conditions, those being studied wished to rise above their conditions and show themselves in a more positive light (Brannigan and Zwerman, 2001, p.56).

As well as the realisation that, when individuals are aware that they are being studied or observed, they modify their behaviour (Prida and Grijalvo, 2008, p.343), there was the additional discovery that motivation can modify workers' behaviour and therefore directly affect their productivity (ibid, p.344). Mayo's work and thinking communicated a "compelling view of human nature and what should be done about it" (O'Connor, 1999, p.223) and, as O'Connor notes, places him "at the origin and heart" of contemporary human resources management (ibid) and an "important figure in the history of applied social science" (Smith, 1998, p.246).

Further thinking regarding the human relations aspect of individuals was developed by Abraham Maslow. Maslow considered a theoretical framework based on human motivation, individual personality development and a hierarchy of human needs. These needs ranged from Physiological needs (at the lowest level), Safety needs, Love needs, Esteem needs, through to Self-actualisation at the highest level. Maslow argued that people were motivated to conduct themselves in a way that they felt was

the best means of fulfilling their own needs (Torrington and Hall, 1991, p.423). This thinking has had a large impact upon modern management approaches to work motivation, as well as the design of work organisation to meet individual needs (Mullins, 1993, p.49). Reflecting on the aspect of Maslow's thinking, some authors suggest that "when individuals strive to fulfil their potential, they are happier and more positive in nature" (Madsen and Wilson, 2006, pp.18-19). Madsen and Wilson further develop this thinking from a contemporary business perspective and suggest that:

"in the future, employers that can meet the needs, and stimulate the development of potential, in their employees will be the most respected and successful. This recognition of individual worth is truly the key to success in building a workforce capable of adapting to the demands of the work place now and in the future" (ibid, p.19).

There are some critics of Maslow's motivational theories. Some critics cite the thinking as "wrong" (Maddock and Fulton, 1998, p.8), or "highly suspect" (Watson, 1996, p.253) due to the seemingly universal level of unquestioning acceptance based on such a comparative lack of empirical data. Others feel Maslow is often misinterpreted (Koltko-Rivera, 2006, pp.302-317); noting how his hierarchy should be taken fluidly, not rigidly, and as a starting point for considerations regarding organisational behaviour (O'Connor and Yballe, 2007, pp.738-756). Nevertheless, the influence Maslow's ideas have brought to studies regarding organisational thinking and employee motivation are widespread and, to some, Maslow is regarded as "a visionary whose ideas pointed the way for further research and development" (Wilson and Madsen, 2008, pp.49-50); ideas which for many have had "a profound effect in how we view human nature today" (ibid).

Herzberg provided further theoretical thought regarding motivational forces upon employees, considering the potential for them to be possible indicators for

organisations to increase their performance or reduce wastage. Herzberg made a distinction between *hygiene* factors and *motivators* in the work environment (Beardwell and Holden, 2001, pp.507-508). Hygiene factors were considered to be environmental, prevented workers from becoming dissatisfied and demotivated, but did not motivate. These factors included pay, working conditions, supervision, policies and interpersonal relationships. It was motivators, Herzberg considered, rather than hygiene factors that motivated individuals. Examples of these included meaningful work, responsibility, recognition, advancement (ibid). The motivators 'relate to what people are allowed to do at work. They are the variables which really motivate people' (Mullins, 1993, p.458). As a small example, Herzberg showed that job enlargement (i.e. more of the same type of work) merely "adds to the meaninglessness of the job" (Torrington and Hall, 1991, p.432), whereas job enrichment (i.e. increasing accountability or authority) can create more positive attitudes on those individuals involved (ibid, pp.433-434). Herzberg illustrated how, by using these hygiene and motivator considerations, an organisation could focus on strengthening or steering the aspects it considered necessary in order to achieve its goals.

It has been argued that there are some weaknesses in Herzberg's hygiene/motivator theory. For example, there is a 'lack of an explicit statement of the theory' (King, 1970, p.19) leading to a confusion or lack of clarity. Others have noted that there are some limitations within Herzberg's study – for example, the interchangeable use of satisfaction and motivation and the assumption that increased satisfaction leads to increased motivation (Rowley, 1996, pp.11-16). These arguments have been recognised and defended by others who note that, whilst potentially valid, Herzberg was really arguing "that people will never experience long-term satisfaction with hygiene" (Sachau, 2007, p.388). When viewed from a positive psychological viewpoint as a basis for understanding the relationship between money and happiness or

satisfaction and dissatisfaction (ibid, p.389), the motivation-hygiene theory continues to remain “a basis for sound managerial principles” (ibid, p.390).

Thinking and developments building upon these and other theorists continue to evolve. For some, thinking has moved away from previous factual beliefs relating to the design of structures and processes within an organisation and its effect upon performance (Willmott, 1995, p.34). Thinking has looked into a social order “wherein the myth of progress based on technical reality has collapsed” (Gephart Jr, 1996, p.93). It has been noted that there is now a “more modest, and some would say postmodern, concern to appreciate the diverse ways in which organizational practices are practically accomplished and represented” (Willmott, 1995, p.34).

However, this postmodern approach builds upon, rather than replaces, previous thinking regarding the subject. In organisation theory “perspectives accumulate, and over time they influence one another” (Hatch, 1997, p.4). There is more understanding of the nature of how an organisation interacts within the context of its customers, society and the world; an ever-increasing “differentiation of the object-world of consumption” (Clegg, 1990, p.18). In a sense, this widens the organisational thinking of researchers. Blau and Scott considered “cui bono - who benefits” from an organisation (1962, p.42); in other words, managers/owners; non-executive individuals; public in contact [customers] and public at large. This was echoed in the late 1980s when the future of business was predicted to be one which was “knowledge-based, an organization composed largely of specialists who direct and discipline their own performance through organized feedback from colleagues, customers and headquarters...an information-based organization” (Drucker, 1988, p.3).

The consideration now for an organisation in a competitive consumer-society is one of organisational image, perception and the power of customers and influencers.

Reflecting on contemporary society, emphasised by the recent global recession, there is the importance of not losing sight of this organisational/ stakeholder/society perspective. When organisations and their managers become so focussed on profit, they can lose their sense of responsibility for the well-being of their industry, the employee and society in general (Kurzynski, 2009, p.358). To avoid this, what is strongly needed for organisations “but seriously lacking, is leadership rooted in a principle of morality characterized by good judgement” (ibid, p.359). A greater emphasis needs to be made on the way organisations do business (McKinley, Mone & Moon, 1999, p.634). Organisational survival depends on its leader’s understanding of, and responsibility towards, society (Wallman, 2010, pp.485-499). It is not enough for an organisation to market itself as having an ethical or social responsibility; it must “behave in accordance with this positioning” (Perez et al, 2013, p.230).

Research shows that one of the reasons that a customer identifies with an organisation “is the knowledge and perception of its social responsibility...it is theoretically accepted that consumers’ feeling of satisfaction can be strengthened by some subjective aspects, especially when they feel in some way emotionally attached to the company” (ibid, pp.229-230). How an organisation and its business ethics are perceived can be argued to be equally – if not more – important than how it is performing in reality. As has been noted, “*perception is all there is*. There is no reality as such. There is only perceived reality...The real *is* what we perceive.” (Peters and Austin, 1994, p.71).

It has been suggested that for organisations to succeed they need to have a relevant “theory of business” with accurate assumptions regarding their markets, customers, competitors, values, technology, strengths and weaknesses (Drucker, 1994, p.95). Some contend that this theory is valid today and provides a unique perspective on business, suggesting that it is this assumption design, combined with challenging



flexibility within an organisation that can determine its competitive advantage (Daly and Walsh, 2010, pp.500-511).

This section is an admittedly brief and truncated history of organisational thinking over the past century. However, through this brief overview of organisational theory, the importance of a considered understanding of a businesses positioning and direction in relation to its customers, competitors and influencers is clear. This positioning must be combined with an effective organisational structure and management style that allows the business and its employees to deliver its direction. Whilst a business exists for a reason; often, but not exclusively, for profit and competitive advantage; this should ideally be achieved in a responsible way that has a considered understanding of the impact upon society too.

Perception can become a reality in the eyes of an observer. An understanding of the nature of perception when positioning an organisation, combined with effective customer and employee communications, can help to influence and affect that perception. Whether approaching organisational theory from a systematic, bureaucratic, motivational, social perspective, or indeed a hybrid or new perspective, a business remains a concept bound together by inter-dependent relationships of individuals. When this is recognised and understood, the importance to an organisation of investing in and valuing its individuals - its human capital – becomes apparent. This investment in and utilisation of people is considered in more detail within the next section that looks at human capital.

### **Human capital**

The importance to the success and growth of a business through having a clear understanding of the purpose and motivation for its individuals and an effective structure has been discussed. Having determined this it follows that, for a business to

thrive, one important goal should be the effective utilisation of its human resources in order to achieve organisational success. For many businesses, continued success, growth and maximisation of production will come from individuals focused on development, innovation and effective response to change. There is considered thinking, referred to as *human capital theory* that equates formal education and a skilled workforce with an improvement in productivity. This section looks at aspects of this theory and how an understanding of it can positively impact upon business competitiveness.

Human capital theory suggests that individuals and society derive economic benefits from investing in people (Sweetland, 1996, p.341). The theory “suggests that education increases the productivity and earnings of individuals; therefore, education is an investment. In fact, this investment is not only crucial for individuals but it is also the key to the economic growth of a country” (Tan, 2014, p.2). This investment can be in the form of general or transferable skills which can be used equally productively across other organisations, or in the form of organisational-specific skills that can enhance an individual’s productivity solely within the organisation investing in their training (Beardwell and Holden, 2001, p.81).

Human capital theory emphasises “that the development of skills is an important factor in production activities” (Olaniyan and Okemakinde, 2008, p.157). It is suggested that education “increases the productivity and efficiency of workers by increasing the level of cognitive stock of economically productive human capability which is a product of innate abilities and investment in human beings” (ibid, p.158). This is supported by findings noting that educated workers “are more likely to participate in the labour market, and their active working life is generally longer than that for those with lower educational attainment” (Blöndal et al, 2002, p.50).

It has been proposed that human capital is “strictly an economic concept...a form of capital because it is the source of future earnings, or of future satisfactions or of both of them. It is *human* because it is an integral part of man” (Schultz, 1972, p.5). Human capital theory is an optimistic theory; one that promotes the idea that education is a powerful social and individual lever (Vandenberghe, 1999, p.130). The theory does have its critics, because it is difficult to prove that there is a direct correlation between education and economic profitability, or that all education is always of benefit. For some, this can be seen to provide ammunition “to politicians by which policy makers can form an educational policy placing economic concerns at the very center of it” (Tan, 2014, p.21).

For an organisation, awareness that educational investment in the workforce (one of a businesses most expensive continuing overheads) can have a positive economic and competitive-edge return must be a powerful incentive, regardless of the difficulties in proving direct correlations. The productive potential of human capital “lies in the knowledge and experience people use to solve problems and get work done” (Greeve, Benassi, Sti, 2010, p.52). The impact of educational investment in people can be seen at the individual level “in the form of improved performance...at the organizational level in the form of improved productivity and profitability...at societal level in the form of returns that benefit the entire society” (Nafukho, Hairston and Brooks, 2004, p.549). Education “amounts to an investment that generates a particular form of capital: human capital” (Vandenberghe, 1999, p.129). In essence, human capital theorists contend that “an educated population is a productive population” (Olaniyan and Okemakinde, 2008, p.158).

There is some evidence to support this theory of reward for an organisation through investment in the skills levels of its employees. Analysts Porter and Cambell spent ten years collecting data on organisational spend on employee education and training.

Their study concluded that organisations “that made investments in employee development subsequently outperformed the stock market, with returns that were significantly higher...training and development expenditures per employee proved to be an important leading indicator of future stock prices (Porter and Cambell, 2006, pp.102-103). In 2010, as the British economy began to emerge from global recession, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) noted the determination of many organisations to hold onto their talent through innovative and creative business solutions (CIPD, 2010, Online). For example, sabbaticals and part-time work was offered as an alternative to redundancy and training budgets were maintained in the face of cost-cutting elsewhere. This prompted the suggestion that at last there may be signs that there is a “human capital approach to people management where people are viewed as an asset to be maximised rather than a cost to be managed” (ibid).

In the context of this research, evidence to show that there may be a national understanding and a move towards businesses valuing the investment in their workforce is important. Intangible resources such as human capital are likely to provide organisations with a competitive edge because they are rare, socially complex and difficult for competitors to imitate (Hitt et al, 2001, p.13). As the changing nature of work in the new economy moves ever-increasingly from manufacturing-based to knowledge-based, it is important that organisations understand the economic potential and value within their employees. This will not only allow for the possibility of greater business stability and growth through continuous investment in human capital, but also focus businesses on the one “time-deficit that can make a difference – time for people” (McGregor, Tweed and Pech, 2004, p.162).

As we entered the twenty-first century, there was increasing evidence to show that the new labour market for skills was witnessing a shift in demand in favour of skilled labour at the expense of unskilled labour (Heckman et al, 1999, p.26). From an individual

perspective and sense of satisfaction, education is positively associated with a sense of personal control. The well educated tend to have higher status occupations with greater personal control, economic rewards and security (Schieman and Plickert, 2008, p.157). Empirical results (both for direct as well as indirect costs) do indeed show that “education confers significant wage advantages to individuals” (Blundell et al, 1999, p.3). Sociologically, there can be non-material benefits, such as an individual’s place within society, quality of life, health and life expectancy, as well as economic and other material benefits (Heise and Meyer, 2004, p.326). Others support this observation, summarising that “better-educated people are healthier, have less unemployment, are more open to change, and work more efficiently” (Thompson et al, 2008, p.32).

An underlying theme running through the literature theory so far has been that of the need for there to be continuous organisational evolution for business survival, particularly for those businesses seeking to expand and thrive. It is interesting to note that a successful organisation is much more than an ideological concept based around one or a select few individuals. It is an interdependent and evolving system that relies as much upon its understanding of and response to changing local and global consumer demands and cultural phenomena as it does to the needs of the employee; all the time ensuring these are aligned and balanced against organisational direction. Educating the workforce through investment in human capital has benefits not just for the organisation but for the employee too. An understanding of the importance of business development and competitiveness through the utilisation of the uniqueness of the employed talent that exists within the company can be seen to be a key organisational survival, development and economic driver.

The next section of this literature review looks at the nature of business competitiveness from a wider perspective before returning to the importance of educated and skilled employee contribution.

## **Competitive business – Competitive advantage**

Businesses exist for a reason. In a competitive environment where maximisation of profits often is a key business goal, businesses must ensure that they deliver, and continue to deliver, products and services that meet their customers' needs by using the most efficient and profitable methods.

A business is an organisation that is set up "in order to achieve a set of objectives. This includes the obvious – businesses that sell their products for profit – but also...organisations such as charities, local and national government (including education" (Hagan and Wylie, 2006, p.3). Businesses are created to provide products or services to customers (Madura, 2007, p.1). For a business to be successful, it needs to be able to exist, survive and adapt to a competitive environment. From a strategic perspective, the notion that "superior performance requires a business to gain and hold an advantage over competitors" remains central to this thinking (Day and Wensley, 1988, p.1). In a free enterprise system, one of the primary goals of organisations is to be competitive. Competitive organisations "realise that customers want to secure products or services in a form that is acceptable to them, and when they want them" (Pace, 2002, pp.99-100). Competition "consists of the constant struggle among firms for a comparative advantage in resources that will yield a marketplace position of competitive advantage and, thereby, superior financial performance" (Hunt and Morgan, 1995, p.8). Within this environment, the key for a business is to hold a competitive advantage over others in order to thrive within its own industry.

In the search for a competitive advantage, organisations often differ in competitive scope (or breadth) of their activities (Porter and Millar, 1985, p.89). Porter and Miller view competitive scope across four key dimensions – segment scope, vertical scope, geographic scope and industry scope. The authors suggest that competitive scope can help a company tailor its activity to a particular target segment in order to increase

value or to differentiate itself (ibid). Porter builds upon the idea of competitive scope. Porter suggests that the “basic tool for diagnosing competitive advantage and finding ways to enhance it is the *value chain*, which divides a firm into the discrete activities it performs in designing, producing, marketing and distributing its product” (Porter, 1985, p.26). Porter notes how the competitive scope can have a powerful role in competitive advantage through its influence on the value chain. A narrow scope can create competitive advantage through tailoring the value chain, and a broader scope can add value through the exploitation of interrelationships among the value chains that impact upon different segments, industries or geographic areas (ibid, pp.26-27).

Others have a slightly different perspective; breaking areas of business competition down into categories of time, cost, price, product differentiation, quality and image (Cronin and Davenport, 1991, p.3). Other authors suggest that competitive advantage comes from focussing on business efficiency, customer responsiveness, reliable quality and innovation (Hill and Jones, 2008, p.74).

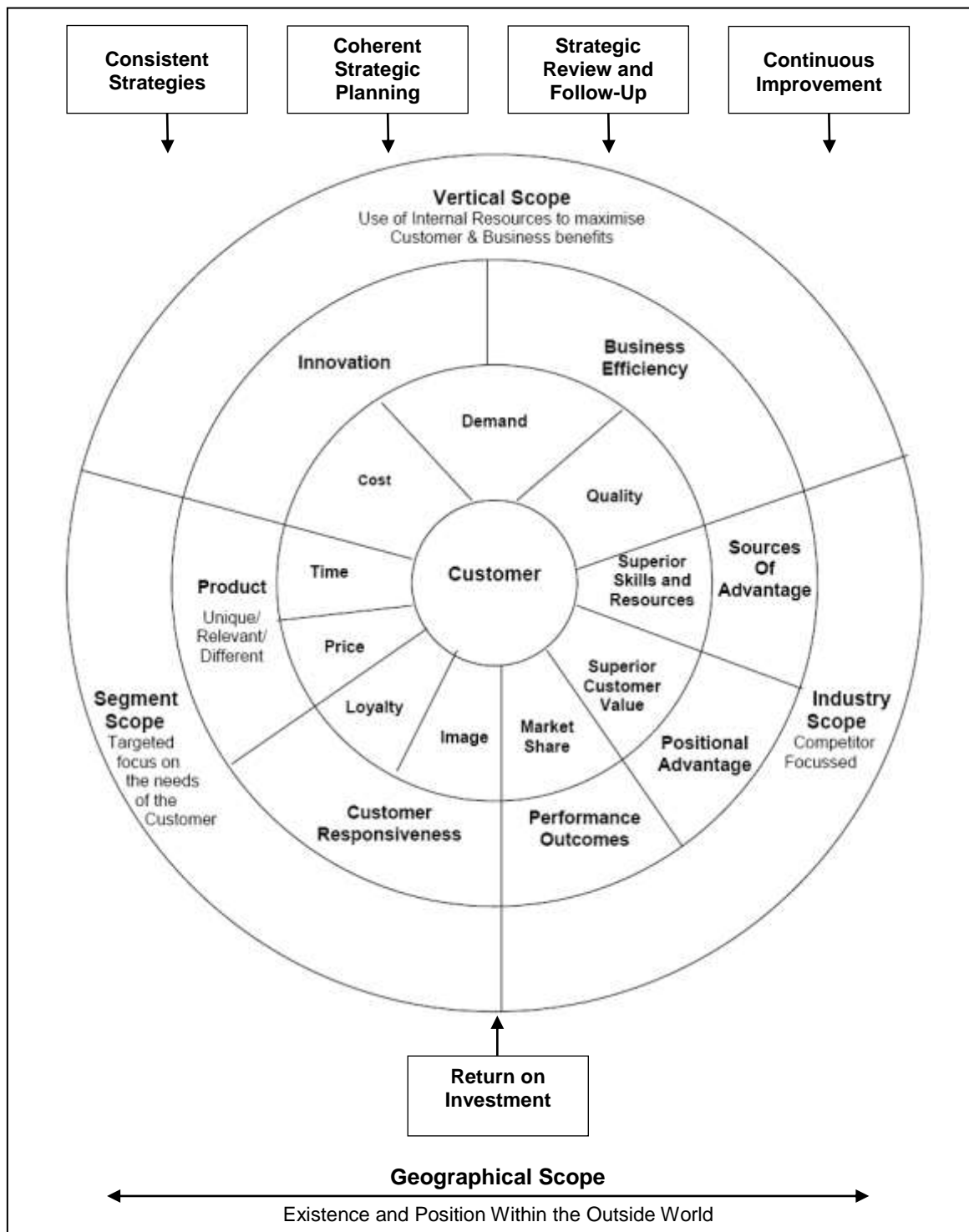
Day and Wensley suggest there are two distinct approaches to gaining a business perspective on the competitive position of an organisation. These approaches range from a competitor-centred one (based on direct management comparisons with competitors), to a customer-focussed one (which looks at benefits to the customer and aligning these to the ability of the organisation to deliver them) (Day and Wensley, 1988, p.1). Along lines somewhat reflective of the organisational thinking previously discussed (in particular the approaches to motivating the workforce and the benefits of investing in human capital), it has been suggested that the most important way an organisation can achieve competitive success is through the successful use of its people (Pfeffer, 1995, p.16). Competitive success, Pfeffer suggests, “entails seeing the workforce as a source of strategic advantage, not just as a cost” (ibid). Business leaders that take advantage of this and work with their staff, rather than limit their

activities or replace them, are often able to successfully outmanoeuvre and outperform their competitors (ibid).

There are other reflections upon successful business competitiveness which focus on consistency and continuous improvement. Assuming the foundations of an initial business premise are sound, prerequisites to it being a strong competitor revolve around two conditions; “mutually consistent strategies and coherent strategic planning and follow-up” (Nilsson and Rapp, 2005, p.189). The authors suggest that such businesses can expect a handsome return on their investment if, as part of these strategies, they establish an organisational culture where the usefulness of continual improvement is a central theme (ibid, p.210). Others agree with the culture of continual improvement, noting that for a business “to achieve flexibility, responsiveness and the ability to adapt quickly to changes within its environment, the implementation of a sound strategy for continuous improvement is essential” (Kaye and Anderson, 1999, p.486). Anderson comments on the traits that separate an organisation adept at continuous improvement from one that is merely adequate. Key traits, he suggests, include improvement skills and training in them; organising for improvement and stimulating an improvement-oriented organisational culture (Anderson, 2007, p.93).

For some, the ability to compete is a key to survival, suggesting that “the survival of any business enterprise or organization depends on its ability to compete effectively” (Madu, 2000, p.937) and that in order to survive there must be a continuous updating of products and services that are relevant to customers and stakeholders (ibid). For others, continuous process and product improvement is “the key to achieving and maintaining world-class competitiveness” (Jackson and Frigon, 1996, p.353). Having organisational evolution and change at the heart of a company’s culture is a further perspective. One way for a business to remain competitive is to focus the commitment of the organisation towards continuous improvement, with the idea that change “should





**Table 2**

***Factors impacting upon business competitiveness***

*Maykels*

*(After Porter and Millar (1985); Day and Wensley (1988); Cronin and Davenport (1991); Hunt and Morgan (1995); Nilsson and Rapp (2005); Hill and Jones (2008))*

be a constant” (Beattie, 2007, p.267). Continuous improvement and organisational change should in fact “become the way to do business” (ibid).

Although terminology varies within the thinking, there is also a great deal of consistency and overlapping of thought in the ideas discussed above. A summary, merging these into an illustrative overview of the factors that can impact upon and influence business competitiveness can be seen in **Table 2**. This table provides an overview of organisational competitiveness themes that have been highlighted within the literature, as well as providing some vital areas for consideration in the development of this research topic on the impact FE leaders believe they make on business competitiveness.

Competitive advantage can be achieved, or aspired to, through responding to and planning for numerous factors. One element that runs through the above thinking, regardless of how positioning of an organisation is viewed, is that a business does not exist in isolation. Because there are competitors, suppliers, customers and many other outside influences impacting upon the organisation, real business thought must continuously take place to ensure effective positioning and continual business evolution occurs. The next section looks at the effects of market forces and the outside world on an organisation and how these can shape it. The nature of the life cycles of products and services offered and the continual need for review is also discussed from the perspective of developing and maintaining a competitive business.

### **Market forces, responsiveness and product life cycles**

From a practical perspective, an organisation often does not have the luxury of time before it needs to respond to outside forces. In some instances, due to the nature of the competitive world, a business can be caught off-guard by changes or competitive initiatives that are beyond its control. When these situations occur, the effectiveness of

a businesses response will rest to a large extent on the appropriateness of its structure, leadership and skilled workforce.

The external business environment “consists of institutions, organisations and forces operating outside the company” (Prakash, 2005, p.4). Many people view these forces in terms of political/legal, economic, social/cultural and technological dimensions (Sloman, 2005, p.11). To be successful, “a business needs to adapt to changes in its business environment and, wherever possible, take advantage of them” (ibid, p.30). This will require leaders and managers to not only fully understand the nature of their own organisations, but to be aware of the context within which the external environment can impact upon their business. It is important on a continuous basis for a business that “the key external forces for change, and their leading indicators, must be determined and monitored” (Sullivan, 1998, p.256). From a business perspective, a sound awareness of these forces is crucial. The external business environment is predicted to be “changing fundamentally and the shape of business in ten years’ time will be very different from what we see today” (Bradshaw, Hensher and McCafferty, 2009, p.6). At the end of January 2011, the outgoing Director-General of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) asserted that due to economic policy, recession and other external forces, private sector investment and trade would be the two engines of growth required to drive the UK’s job creation and economic recovery for the foreseeable future (Lambert, 2011, online). This cannot just happen in isolation from the political environment. For regional, as well as national growth, policy and decision-makers need to “be responsive to different and changing local business demographics and labour markets. But it also raises new challenges in co-ordinating activity to promote enterprise and tackling region-wide challenges” (CBI, 2012a, p.38).

To monitor and have awareness of the environment is not enough; effective business growth and success requires leadership, management and a workforce with the skills in

place in order to respond and take advantage of environmental changes. It is important to be aware of the fact that a business needs to be a product of ever-changing outside forces as well as internal management, direction and leadership. The external environment shapes the type of leadership capacity a business requires (Weiss, Molinoro, Davey, 2007, p.128). As has been noted, “a strong corporate culture with core values shared by everyone can align internal activities and responses in the face of uncertainty and change” (Andersen, 2013, p.172).

As the external business environment is not static, it requires consideration of whether strategic changes and responses are needed in order for it to remain successful, as well as whether new leadership capacity is required (ibid). An awareness of change imposed upon a business through external forces is a step towards an understanding of the nature of market forces and their impact upon a business. Market forces have been defined as “the forces of supply and demand in an unregulated market between buyers and sellers...these forces determine the price at which a product or service is sold and the quantity that will be traded” (Malloch and Massey, 2006, p.38).

This pure concept of market forces is based upon “several firms interacting at the same time with the consumer” (Morris Jr, 1996, p.49) and assumes “independent actions upon the buyers and sellers” (ibid). There is an implication within the above assumption that an organisation, once aware of the power and nature of the markets within which it operates, can have the ability to influence them. The idea is that a business with superior organisational capabilities could be more successful in responding to market forces if it is able to surpass its competitors through “improving its own value-creating capability” (Lazonick, 1991, p.148). This may be as simple as the way markets are perceived by one organisation as opposed to another, which will ultimately determine the way it responds to markets and attempts to influence them. As an example, one organisation may view a market from a high-low profit basis;

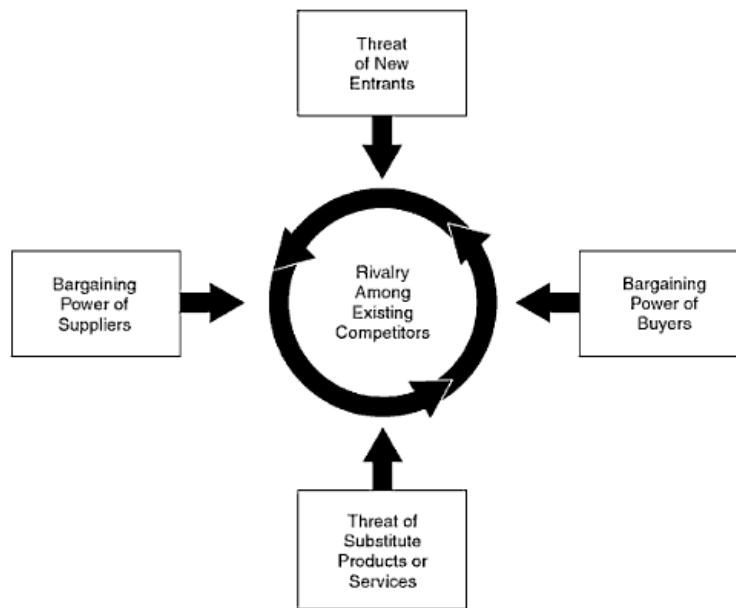
another may view the same market but from a long-short term relationship basis.

Although the same market, different organisational perspectives and approaches “may contribute to very different business decisions between these firms; for example, the firm that views its market through the lens of relationships is more likely to give preference to a long-term relationship over short-term profitability” (Diaz Ruiz and Kowalkowski, p.1, 2014).

An organisation’s viewpoint of its markets, coupled with its leadership strategy can therefore affect its approach to interacting with markets and, to some extent, influence the potential nature of response.

Whether the focus of an organisation is primarily local, regional, national or global; when several organisations are competing with similar products or services, they are competing against many external forces. The close nature of their competitive environment determines the nature of the industry they operate within. It is this competitive closeness of industry that is of primary relevance to business leaders as this can directly determine levels of response or direction needed to flourish.

Porter suggested that the state of competition in an industry consists of five basic competitive forces (illustrated in **Table 3**) – entry, threat of substitution, bargaining power of buyers, bargaining power of suppliers and rivalry amongst current competitors (Porter, 1980, pp. 3-6). Consideration of the relative positioning of a business with respect to external forces must play a vital role in determining organisational strategy. Different forces take on prominence in shaping industry competition and not all will necessarily be important in each industry (ibid, p. 6-33).



**Table 3**  
***The five forces that shape industry competition***  
*(Porter, 2008, p.4)*

A lot of thinking regarding competitive positioning has been influenced by Porter's industry competitiveness and five forces interplay (Kotha and Orne, 1989, p.214). Some suggest that these forces "determine the average profitability of the industry and have a correspondingly strong impact on the profitability of individual corporate strategies" (Zack. 1999, p.30). Businesses "respond to conditions in their marketplaces by modifying their competencies" (Lindahl and Beyers, 1999, p.2). This can include internal resources as well as external relationships, depending on the strategic directional modifications necessary.

Porter's work is not taken to be absolute or without points for consideration. Whilst acknowledging the powerfulness of Porter's five forces model for business planning, there are those who also note some limitations within it (Luffman et al, 1996, p.49). One limitation proposed refers to the true definition of 'competitor'. This requires strategists to accurately map the market boundaries of their business, as the nearer an organisation is attached to the product, the closer will be the substitutes (ibid, p.50),

which will therefore factor in determining potential growth or profitability forecasting. A further limitation relates to the timing of the model when used for planning (does it relate to today or tomorrow?) and, dependent on the answer, how does this affect reliability (ibid, p.52)?

As the nature and demand from the consumer is constantly changing, profitability within a businesses product range will also be changing, kept in flux by the dynamic system of market forces (Wall, 2002, p.7). It has been noted that a product “which is new to the world, as opposed to merely being new to the company, passes through distinctive competitive stages in its life cycle.” (Dean, 1969, p.165). Products, once introduced, pass through several stages as they mature and age, often referred to as the *product life cycle*. Successful products pass through four basic stages; introduction, growth, maturity, decline (Kurtz, et al, 2007, p.341).

The concept of the life cycle is a useful aid for managers in being able to visualise the finite opportunities of products, with the inevitability of decline. It helps to focus attention on a likely sales pattern if no corrective action is taken; for example, a product extension range or market development (McDonald, 1984, pp.135-137). Texts occasionally add a saturation stage into the cycle, as illustrated in **Table 4**, to highlight the point. It should be noted that, although the illustration appears equally divided, it is unlikely that the time periods shown would ever be quite as even.

Many businesses begin their initial market analysis with a view to regarding future growth, repeat or renewed business by a consideration of product life cycles.

Assuming that an organisation exists within a competitive, profit-driven environment, then regardless of its size, a business understanding and awareness of the growth, maturity and decline of products is important.



**Table 4**  
**Product life cycle**  
*(McDonald, 1984, p.136)*

Product life cycles can function “as an enabling condition in the sense that the underlying forces that inhibit or facilitate growth create opportunities and threats having strategic implications” (Day, 1981, p.65). Faster timing and speed have become ever-important factors as competitor response times quicken. “Shorter product life cycles, more rapid product obsolescence, and the increasing intensity of global competition... (are driving businesses) to strive for a more rapid introduction of new products to market” (Carillo and Franza, 2006, p.536).

Windrum and Birchenhall build on the forces impacting upon the product life cycle by adding consumer demand into the equation. They contend that “evolving consumer preferences, ignored in the traditional product life cycle account, are shown to fundamentally influence the direction of technological innovation” (Windrum and Birchenhall, 1998, p.130), highlighting how the customers themselves can often help to increase competition and demand, as well as product evolution.

Having considered the impact of market forces (and also acknowledged Luffman et al's limitations with regards to Porter's thinking), it is clear that an organisation's leaders



should understand the industry that they are operating within. This could, most likely, be broader in scope than the particular nature of its business. For example, managers of a restaurant may consider the business to exist within the hospitality sector. However, it also may exist within the leisure industry, competing against disposable incomes that may equally well be spent on sport, white goods, entertainment, etc. rather than food. It also competes in the food and catering sector with supermarkets for comparable products, where individuals may choose to eat in, rather than out. There may well be other sectors too, and these can be reflected similarly across other businesses; a fact that leaders and managers need to be aware of in order to understand the true nature of the competitive markets they are operating within.

It is clear that, for a business wishing not just to survive but also to succeed and grow, several key factors need to be considered. These include a precise understanding of the nature of the markets the business is entering, the competitors within it, and the likely lifespan of the products. This analysis will help focus attention onto the potential organisational impact of these industrial forces. It is then that leadership, coupled with the effective skills of the workforce can help shape an organisation's current and future position. Cockburn, et al note:

“Structural analysis is a powerful tool for understanding why a particular strategic action (e.g., branding or investment in complementary product areas) may be associated with supranormal returns, but in and of itself says nothing about the role of senior management – or the process of strategic choice – in determining profitability”

(Cockburn, Henderson, Stern, 2000, p.1126).

Whilst the authors challenge the assumption that competitive advantage through successful use of Porter's model implies good leadership, they do note that

convergence within competitors does tend to occur as a result of directional response and that managers from poorly positioned firms can often be those most proactive and responsive in making strategic and positional change (ibid, p.1141). Leadership at some level therefore (either anticipatory or reactionary) as a response to external forces, does matter when it comes to building competitive advantage, and will be considered further in the following section.

### **Leadership and management**

The development of organisational skills and training as a result of leadership decisions could be an important factor in determining business competitiveness. With the ability to consider organisational positioning in anticipation or response to the dynamics of the external market being a necessary trait of leadership; it is prudent for this research to look at the nature of leadership itself.

The concept of leadership is woven throughout organisational theory. It has been suggested that they are so closely connected that the absence of leadership can be seen as the absence of organisation (Smircich and Morgan, 1982, p.257). Definitions of leadership are many and varied. Leadership has been described as “an influence process that assists groups of individuals towards goal attainment” (Northouse, 2010, p.12). Leadership is also “about the ongoing process of building and sustaining a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those willing to follow” (Gallos, 2008, p.3). Leadership has also been described as one individual influencing others towards that goal achievement; a “relationship through which one person influences the behaviour of other people” (Mullins, 1993, p.229). A brief definition suggests that leadership is “motivation” (Maddock and Fulton, 1998, p.6). A leader “analyzes the environment and market conditions in which the organization operates and provides visions for its future” (Scovetta and Ellis, 2014, p.3627). It is a leader who is responsible for organisational direction and change. This change may require specific

training and/or development of workplace skills, which should be taken into account when making such decisions in order to maximise opportunities for business competitiveness.

There has been much debate as to whether leaders are individuals born with certain personality characteristics (or traits) that naturally make them suitable for a leadership role, or whether leadership is a role that can be learned. Leadership trait theories attempt to explain distinctive characteristics that can account for leadership effectiveness (Lussier and Achua, 2010, p.16). Traits of leadership are competencies that are needed if an individual is to emerge, succeed or be effective as a leader (Bass and Bass, 2008, p.103). The trait perspective towards leadership “suggests that certain individuals have special innate or inborn characteristics or qualities that make them leaders and that it is these qualities that differentiate them from nonleaders” (Northouse, 2010, p.4). Key leader traits include: drive, leadership motivation, honesty and integrity, self-confidence, cognitive ability and knowledge of the business (Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1991, p.48). Trait theory tends to focus on who a leader is rather than what a leader does (Rossiter, 2007, p.118).

Situational context and the nature and make-up of the team, group or individuals requiring leadership may result in differing styles being required at different times. These situations are often referred to as *contingency* views of leadership. These views suggest that the effectiveness of a leader “is contingent upon both the leader’s personality and the characteristics of the situation” (Roeckelein, 1998, p.294). It has been noted that “context may be a key determinant of what types of leadership traits or activities are accepted and produce effective performance” (Lord and Maher, 1993, p.291). Contingency views of leadership suggest that there is no individual leadership style to suit every situation – as the situation changes, so too must the traits of leadership (Yun, et al, 2006, p.375).

One element remains common throughout the literature; a leader requires followers and the results of leadership are reflected in the actions of the followers. As noted, “the signs of outstanding leadership appear primarily among the followers” (DePree, 1998, p.130). This close relationship between the leader and followers is echoed by others. Leadership has been defined as an “influence relationship between leaders and followers” (Daft, 2008, p.27); one in which a communicated and trusted shared purpose is essential. For an organisation to be sustainable, and in order for individuals to work together in a synergistic manner, the leadership function must involve effectively interpreting and articulating the organisational purpose (Ikerd, 2005, p.115). It has been noted that “at the strategic leadership level, it also becomes important not only *that* a good decision is made but *how* that decision is effectively executed across levels of the organization” (Avolio, 2007, p.31). Transformational leadership theory “explains the unique connection between a leader and his/her followers that accounts for extraordinary performance and accomplishments for the larger group, unit and organization” (Yammarino and Dubinsky, 1994, p.790). Transformational leadership is a connection that tends to be more enduring and change-focussed when compared with, for example, transactional leadership, which can be more transitory or task and reward-focussed (Lussier and Achua, 2010, p.354). Whilst both styles and approaches have merits, transformational leadership, “with its emphasis on intrinsic motivation and on the positive development of followers, represents a more appealing view of leadership compared to the seemingly “cold,” social exchange process of transactional leadership” (Bass and Riggio, 2006, p.xi).

Yukl, et al suggest that, although there has been much research into leadership theory, it is difficult to agree upon which elements are meaningful. They conclude that a possible means of viewing effective leadership is through a hierarchical taxonomy with three metacategories; task, relations and change behaviour (Yukl, Gordon and Taber, 2002, pp. 15-32). Yukl expands on this tridimensional leadership theory by noting that

“the difficulties of leadership are increased when the situation is rapidly changing” (Yukl, 2004, p.85). As the level of change and potential business uncertainty increases, “there is a greater need for flexible, adaptive leadership at all levels of management” (ibid). In a few cases, this ability to adapt across all levels of an organisation may be instinctive. More often, the benefit of outside help to support change is necessary. The ability for an organisation to adapt, whether through re-skilling, staff development or the benefit of an outside perspective, is vital if leaders, staff and the organisation are to effectively respond to change and uncertainty. This organisational need for staff development and training, particularly from a change, growth and evolutionary perspective is considered within the next section.

### **Staff development and training**

At the heart of this thesis is the consideration of the impact leaders of FE colleges in England believe their organisations contribute towards business competitiveness. An understanding of the literature reflecting on the nature and importance of organisational training and development will help to inform this thinking.

As an organisation evolves and adapts to change, part of that response to change will involve the consideration of the skills of its workforce and whether staff development or training is required. Staff are one of the most valuable (and costly) resources that an organisation invests in. This section will look at aspects which consider the role of staff development and training.

Staff development occurs when an organisation puts “some time and energy into helping their employees grow as professionals and do their jobs better” (Sweitzer and King, 2008, p.148). Sullivan suggests that there is a slight distinction between staff development and staff training. Development may involve training that gives “employees opportunities to retrain and keep current skills” (Sullivan 2009, p.487) and

readies the employee for promotion or a new position. In contrast, staff training seeks to enable the employee to perform their current job (ibid).

Issues relating to staff development build upon theories discussed earlier. Recognising that there is potential for organisational growth and productivity through having a skilled and motivated workforce brings with it the necessity of ensuring that workforce is continuously developed and up to date. Not only are people one of the most important resources an organisation has to pay for, they are also “the most valuable resource” (Homan, 2008, p.209). Others echo this statement and add that not only is the people resource the most valuable, but it may also be “the most complex resource” (Torrington and Hall, 1991, p.52). As such, there is organisational value in developing these human resources (HR). It has been recognised that “a key aim of HR strategy is to create value by building competitive advantage” (Holbeche, 2009, p.144). This competitive advantage can cover organisational elements such as culture, communication, structure, control and resourcing (ibid), depending on organisational need.

Ensuring that staff are performing well and aligned to meet organisational needs is a vital business requirement. As external circumstances, technological advances and organisational directions are rarely static, a regular review of staff skills and knowledge is required and this will often reveal the need for staff development and training. When correctly utilised, learning and development can be “significant experiences for individuals and organisations” (Beardwell and Holden, 2001, p.280). Many organisations successfully embrace powerful ways to align individual and organisational needs by viewing the workforce as an investment rather than a cost (Bolman and Deal, 2003, p.129). In order to accept that view, an understanding of the economic benefits of an investment in training is necessary.

When it comes to quantifying the financial benefits of staff development, it has been suggested that most organisations “develop costs with much more ease than developing the economic value of benefits figure” (Phillips, 2003, p.175). This is particularly evident in smaller organisations, where every element of expenditure can be precious and need clear justification. Some argue, from a small/medium sized enterprise (SME) perspective, that rather than seek a causal relationship of the benefits between training and performance, it is more appropriate to identify positive outcomes advantageous to the company in the widest sense (Patton, et al, 2000, p.24). This is important, especially for SMEs, to accept. Training costs – the actual expenditure plus the opportunity-cost of an employee’s output - may be relatively higher for small organisations (De Kok, 2002, pp.272-273). In addition, smaller organisations provide less formal training to their employees than larger ones (ibid, p.272) This can be due to the shorter time horizons of small companies and the fact that they are often busy trying to survive (e.g. Kirby, 1990, pp.78-87; Storey, 1994, p.3; Gold and Thorpe, 2010, p.136). Nevertheless, regardless of the size of the business, staff development will need to occur on some level. If it does not, the pressures of new and developing competitors, combined with the changing external market will impact upon the competitive positioning of the business.

The importance of understanding and communicating the organisational benefits of staff training therefore must not be underestimated. Not all businesses or managers readily accept that training and development can lead to increased productivity or competitiveness. This can often be the view the smaller the organisation is in size, when day-to-day survival becomes much more the focus of attention. There are indications that “small firms are less likely than larger companies to provide adequate training and development opportunities” (Marlow, 1998, p.39). For small organisations, short-term survival may be a barrier to committing to training, as training can be

“perceived as the time away from job, as well as additional expenses for the owner” (Erden, 2014, p.150) rather than an investment in the organisation’s future.

For managers of SMEs, “companies require a proactive approach to training which sells them specific benefits for their own organizations and helps them either to resolve problems or to grow and develop the business” (Kirby, 1990, p.82). Very often, such companies can be unaware of their training needs (ibid, p.86). Companies and managers can sometimes be unaware that training opportunities are accessible and available. Managers and employees can often be unaware of the possibilities offered by training and not know what to ask for (Kubr and Prokopenko, 1989, p.264; Francesca and Giguère, 2010, p27).

It has been recognised within England that businesses and the economy can benefit from staff training and development. Successive governments, “irrespective of political persuasion, have seen learning, development and training as drivers of business success and hence national prosperity” (CIPD, 2001, p.42). Although not many people “would argue against the importance of training as a major influence on the success of an organisation” (Mullins, 1993, p.579), understanding the benefits and need for training is important, regardless of company size. There is much evidence to show that training does pay off for businesses and that employer-provided training can often benefit both the employer and the employee (Moore, et al, 2003, p.23).

Long-term benefits can outweigh short-term investment. Benefits can include higher skill and knowledge levels, lower staff turnover, reduced recruitment costs and greater staff commitment to an organisation (Kyprianou and Kasket, 1998, p.61). Benefits can also include reduced wastage, improved quality and better customer service (ibid). Conclusions from a study of a large, international human resource review conducted by



the Cranfield School of Management agree that businesses benefit from investment in development and training<sup>6</sup>.

The study demonstrates the value by stating that “apart from the firm’s past profitability, the amount invested in training is the most important factor in explaining the probability of belonging to the top 10 per cent in profitability in an industry” (Hansson, 2007, p.324). Others note that the benefits to employers of providing workplace training are of two main types; productive and recruitment benefits. Productive benefit comes from the increased productivity of the trainee. Recruitment benefit is the value to the employer of reliable information regarding the capacities of the trainee, which supports efficient recruitment (Field, et al, 2010, p.207).

It has been observed that the need for more people with better skills is not only about plugging gaps in day-to-day business operations – it also affects the ability of organisations to shape their future successfully (CBI, 2009, p.6). Naturally, the focus of enhancing and developing the skills of the workforce through training must serve a purpose, rather than be training for its own sake. Training can be an “extremely powerful and cost effective investment by an organisation, but only if it is implemented to match and complement the business’s needs and objectives” (Denby, 2010, p.147).

Measuring the success of training is “still an issue that challenges the most sophisticated and progressive learning development functions” (Phillips and Phillips, 2009, p.45). Whilst it is recognised that learning is necessary for organisations

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<sup>6</sup> The Cranfield Network (Cranet) is a collaboration between over 40 universities and business schools which was established in 1989. Included within the research activities undertaken by the network is a regular international comparative survey of organisational policies and practices in comparative Human Resource Management across the world. Further details regarding this, and the network’s other activities can be found online as at 25 February 2011 at: <http://www.cranet.org>

experiencing growth or increased competition, or during restructuring and times of rapid change, very often impact is assumed to exist, rather than truly being proven (ibid, p.46). Some measurements of the effectiveness of implementation of staff development and training can be more straightforward than others.

When assessing the acquisition of knowledge and skills, the developments of the trainees are, in the main, observable and measurable (Buckley and Caple, 2008, p.225). For example, if the development was that an employee would be capable of performing a task to a certain level of effectiveness following completion of training, then this can be relatively straightforward to measure. Similarly, if the training involved achievement of a standard recognised by an awarding body in the form of a qualification or independent level of assessment, then that too can be simple to measure.

Probably the most difficult area to measure change or development is one that involves employee attitude (Buckley and Caple, 2008, p.225), as this can be outwardly masked by the individual. The term *chain of impact* has been used to assess a measurable value of training (Phillips and Stone. 2002, p.11). It is possible to view this impact from both an employer and an employee perspective. From a business leader's perspective, an important measure is the return on investment a company can expect from its employee. From an employee perspective, what may matter is the type of learning that has been acquired (ibid).

It has been argued that the lack of "objective, performance-improving models for trainers has inhibited both their development and the achievement of productive return on investment" (Mitchell, 2003, p.20). An example of potential methods for distilling evaluation into five levels for evaluation and measurement is summarised in **Table 5** (McGivern and Bernthall, 2003, pp.7-9).

Levels for Evaluation	Questions Asked	Measurement Tools Used
Reactions and Planned Action	How did participants respond to the training?	Participant questionnaires and/or verbal feedback.
Learning	To what extent did participants experience changes in attitude, skills, or motivations as a result of the training?	Measure participants' ability to answer questions about the training or their ability to demonstrate newly acquired skills.
Behaviour	Can behaviour change be observed on the job as a result of training (i.e. Training transfer)?	Multirater (360 degree) assessment.
Results	How have organisational outcomes changed as a result of the training programme?	Usually tracked over time. Most difficult and costly to assess. Could include productivity, customer satisfaction, efficiency, morale, profitability
Return on Investment	Did the benefits of training outweigh the costs?	Measures the cost of training intervention versus the return on investment – usually in monetary values

**Table 5**  
**Measurements for evaluating training**  
*(Adapted from McGivern and Bernthall, 2003, pp.7-9)*

Evaluation of training can also be difficult because managers are often looking for increased performance and not necessarily the increased learning on which trainers usually judge the success of their training (Berge, 2008, p.390). Lack of performance can also only partially be related to training, making the measurement of performance as a return on training investment even less accurate (ibid). This highlights the importance of understanding from the outset why the decision to undertake training or development of skills is being made.

Defining whether organisational objectives and direction need to be met by training developments or other methods must first be considered by managers and leaders before committing to it. Before investing time and resources in training, those responsible not only need to have accurately defined the performance problem, they also have to be sure that it is the right solution the problem (Bailey and Burch, 2010,

p.276). It is recognised that jumping to the conclusion that training or learning is the solution before the problem or opportunity has been properly identified can be a common organisational mistake (Rosenberg, 2006, p.299). Skills development and training “must take place within an overall framework for workforce development that directly contributes to the organization achieving its mission” (Sims, 1998, p.14).

It is crucial that the correct skills development and organisational/employee training needs are identified. The prerequisite to any training investment for an organisation should be the completion of a training needs analysis; without it time, resources and company return on investment may be wasted (Denby, 2010, p.148), as training may not necessarily be the solution to an organisational issue. An assessment of training needs should focus analyses on at least three levels; the organisational level, the task level and the person level (Bronwyne, 2008, p.239; Mathis and Jackson, 2008, p.267, et al). This can help determine which employees need training, and at what level (Bronwyne, 2008, p.239), as well as ensuring it is focussed on achieving organisational goals.

Unawareness of training needs can be one failing for a business; lack of respect for it can be another. Some businesses or managers can hold beliefs that “training is simple, unimportant or pointless” (Bunch, 2007, p.157). This can undermine any opportunity for staff development before it has a chance to succeed. There is evidence to show that leaders and managers can believe that they themselves do not need training (Hamlin, 2010, p.206) and this belief, unless effectively challenged, can result in a negative response to workforce development.

As a manager can play a key role in the success or failure of an organisation or team’s training, many organisations centralise the organisational role by allocating individual training departments with the responsibility for promoting the positive aspects and need

for organisational and staff development. Although more resource-intensive, this approach does have the value of removing inconsistency across an organisation, as well as having a greater chance of removing organisational barriers. Whilst in some organisations, such departments may take a reactive approach to responding to ad-hoc training requests; many of these departments act strategically; adopting a planned training approach to meeting business needs by anticipating training requirements (Barbazette, 2008, p.2). The training department very often forms part of the personnel function (Torrington and Hall, 1991, p.402). There can be advantages to drawing on outside sources for training (such as for specialised knowledge or skills), but co-ordinating the role in-house is important, as the training activity should be closely connected to the workplace (ibid, pp.402-403).

It is important that staff development and training should build all employees' skills (Burke, 2003, p.19), rather than be directed on favoured individuals or departments. When implemented correctly, training, centrally co-ordinated can have a positive impact upon an organisation, and ensure that it is focussed not only on the staff that need it, but also on organisational objectives.

Training and development of staff is not a one-off activity. It is a continuous process that runs in parallel with evolving organisational objectives as well as external and internal changes. For employers and employees alike this means that learning and the acquisition of skills is not restricted to one point in time, but takes place throughout their lives. The term *lifelong learning* has been used to describe this concept. Some definitions regard lifelong learning rigidly as "the acquisition of any qualifications after the age of 25" (Dorsett, Lui and Weale, 2010, p.4). Others take a broader approach that encompasses "individuals' abilities to learn from experience in ways that enable them to cope with continual change" (Bennett and Bell, 2010, p.415).

The concept of lifelong learning is ambitious in its scope; to engage all in continuous development. It shifts the focus (or certainly shares the responsibility) for development from the organisation to the individual (OECD, 2011, Online). Further Education colleges have a role to play in developing products and supplying training that is effective in meeting these lifelong learning needs. The role of Further Education is examined in more detail in the next section.

### **The role of Further Education colleges in developing competitive businesses**

Further Education in England plays a key role in delivering vital academic and vocational skills and learning to the post-compulsory learning age sector. This is recognised by the government. The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation & Skills, acknowledged that “Further Education is a fundamental part of this Government’s growth strategy” (BIS, 2011d, Online). This importance was echoed by the former Minister for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, who suggested that “Further Education is the unheralded triumph of our education system [a triumph that is important] to this country - our economy, society and individuals’ lives” (ibid).

The role and purpose of colleges of further education has evolved and changed as successive governments adjust their perspectives and policies with regard to the sector. The coalition government viewed colleges as social enterprises at the hearts of their communities;

“Colleges are social enterprises, in the widest sense of that term: enterprising in their engagement with business; responding directly to the needs of their customers, winning business directly from employers and individuals, whilst driven also by a strong social purpose which ensures that those at most disadvantage in local communities are helped to reach their potential”.  
(Hancock, 2014, pp.1-2)

The government does recognise and acknowledge that further education has a key educational role; however the FE sector does also appear to be an area of education that attracts considerable government change. It is a sector that “has, arguably, witnessed more radical change and development over the last few decades than any other sphere of educational provision” (Hyland and Merrill, 2003, p.4).

### **Further Education – A brief history**

It has been suggested that the 1944 Education Act was a landmark in the history of further education (Cantor and Roberts, 1972, p.1). For the first time, every Local Education Authority had a statutory responsibility to provide adequate facilities for further education in its area (ibid; HMSO, 1944, p.33). In 1956, in an effort to ensure Britain was competitive and at the forefront of technology, the White Paper on Technical Education was introduced. This outlined a five year £100m programme of expansion at technical colleges and university departments (Maclure, 2006, p.239). At its heart were national aims to “strengthen the foundations of our economy, to improve the standards of living of our people and to discharge effectively our manifold responsibilities overseas” (HMSO, 1956, p.5). Through a broad and versatile curriculum, students would be taught to be adaptable.

In the 1950s and 1960s, through their responsibility for FE, the municipal local education authorities (LEAs) “worked to serve both their communities and the supporting commercial/industrial base” (Fisher, 2010, p.120). This was a period when the local FE (or technical) college, was seen as a civic institution, integral to the fabric of most urban centres and generally associated with a culture of craft vocationalism (ibid). Industry itself was changing too and the nature of work and jobs required individuals with different sets of skills. Fewer students were enrolling on traditional craft based courses because less were needed in industry. “With the decline in demand for industrial craft work in the 1960s and 1970s, FE compensated for its loss in

student numbers by recruiting from a flourishing tertiary and service sector” (Gleeson, 1983, p.35). In this way, the changing patterns of industrial expansion and development resulted in a demand for new types of training and courses that reflected these needs, such as Business, Management, Secretarial courses, etc. (ibid).

Prior to the early 1980s, FE was arguably “considered a backwater of the educational system; its voluntaristic and entrepreneurial nature perhaps reflecting the low status image traditionally associated with technical education” (Gleeson, 1983, p.34). At the beginning of the 1980s however, it was recognised how FE had the ability to cope with enormous changes through an “almost infinite capacity for adjustment” (Cantor and Roberts, 1983, p.10). The authors reflected that a national decline in manufacturing “had led to a proportional decline in apprenticeships and consequently in the traditional vocational courses which the colleges have provided for them” (ibid). Through the 1980s, unemployment rose and programmes such as the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) and later the Employment Training Scheme were introduced, with some of the training delivered by colleges. In addition to this “there was the growth of ‘second chance’ routes with post-16 learners wishing to pursue mainstream academic courses such as GCE ‘O’ (later GCSE) and A-levels” (Hyland and Merrill, 2003, p.13). These were offered to adults returning to study, as well as to school leavers who had not previously secured certification. Colleges were beginning to be encouraged to become responsive, less producer-led institutions that were more sensitive to the needs of employers and communities (ibid, p.14).

Colleges of further education became incorporated following separation from local LEA control by the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. This Act “ended control of FE colleges by local education authorities as the employers provided direct central funding instead through a new Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) system and established colleges as individual employers in their own right” (Beale, 2004, p.468).



The concept of *lifelong learning* became associated with FE, particularly with the replacement of the FEFC by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and the vision and drive of the country's New Labour government. By the end of the century, colleges had embraced diversity. The student population in colleges of further education was "pluralistic, reflecting the diversity not only of its local communities but also society in terms of age, class, gender and ethnicity" (Hyland and Merrill, 2003, p.47).

As FE moved into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the importance of FE to national productivity was recognised further. It was claimed that the colleges and training providers that made up the FE sector were central to achieving the country's ambition for tackling skills weaknesses in order to deliver a labour force with world class skills (DfES, 2006, p.1). The FE sector was seen as central to achieving that ambition and recognised as such in the 2006 White Paper *Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances*. The White Paper renewed the mission of the FE sector, putting the needs and interests of learners and employers at the heart of the system; recognising the FE-employer partnership that was necessary in building successful businesses (ibid, p.2).

This was further developed by the coalition government in their 2010 *Skills for Sustainable Growth* strategy. The government was confident that "a high quality further education sector is at the heart of our skills strategy" (BIS, 2010a, p.14). Using FE as a system for developing employability and moving people into jobs was central to the heart of the strategy. It was also suggested, that "as those who choose vocational routes into work tend to be from lower socio-economic groups, a strong further education and skills system is fundamental to social mobility" (ibid, p.30)<sup>7</sup>. Investment in further education and skills was seen as fundamental to sustainable

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that the data and comment indicated here could benefit from a greater explanation of the factors leading to such a conclusion (for example, consideration of the decision-making process, job opportunities, access to information, role-models, peer-pressure, other support mechanisms, etc.). The statement however does result in a recommendation of FE as a favoured route for skills development and is referenced on that basis.

national growth as well as improving the prospects of individuals and businesses (ibid, p.39).

Ball summed up more recent reflections on the position of the purpose and role of educational policy in England in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He suggested that within policy terms,

“education is now regarded primarily from an economic point of view. The social and economic purposes of education have been collapsed into a single, overriding emphasis on policy making for economic competitiveness and an increasing neglect or sidelining (other than in rhetoric) of the social purposes of education.”

(Ball, 2008, pp.11-12)

### **Employers and Further Education**

Employers expect the vocational education and training (VET) their organisations receive to provide them with the best employees, equipped with the business-focussed skills that they need (OECD, 2010a, p.51). From a business perspective, in order to maximise profits, employers need people with the right skills who can provide them with a competitive edge to deliver services, or manufacture products that their customers want. The strategy from 2010 for FE set out by the coalition government in *Further Education - New Horizon* is one that nurtured economic growth. The relationships that FE providers make with employers would be crucial to delivering this strategy. As the strategy highlighted; “to truly deliver the skills needs of the economy, employers and learners, the relationships between colleges, local authorities, charities, training providers, voluntary organisations and social enterprises must become stronger” (BIS, 2010b, p.2). Training providers, (including further education colleges), as well as private training providers and universities were to be “key partners for business in the delivery of workforce training” (CBI and EDI, 2010, p.48).

This direction received positive acknowledgement. Sector publication *FE News* reflected that there “is plenty of scope for the further education system to adapt to the demands of employers for the benefit of the companies, the individual learners and themselves. But it does require flexibility in outlook and a real desire to respond to exactly what employers want” (Bartley, 2010, Online). Part of this outlook for FE colleges and providers requires consideration of the nature of why employers use FE for their employees’ skills and training. Although it will be different for each company, employee development through accessing FE will have a business purpose and perceived benefits for the employer. Individuals within FE need to have the ability to be able to communicate in a language that employers understand and from a perspective that makes a difference to employers (CBI, 2009, p.14). This could be as simple as using dialogue that does not use ‘FE speak’ (e.g. terminology revolving around qualifications as a goal) but instead uses business benefits and terms that employers understand, such as ‘increased competitiveness’, or ‘profitability’.

FE as a sector is increasingly being guided towards delivery of *employability* skills, particularly for those individuals not currently in the workplace. For some, adult access to learning is governed by the priorities of employability (Ball, 2009, p.48). This notion of ‘employability’ “places a focus on the individual and their qualities and introduces the strategic importance of work-relevant learning” (ibid, p.43). Funding steers and policies from government are also guiding FE and providers of education for employers towards delivery of courses that contain ‘employability’ skills that meet the needs of employers. The Coalition government developed the previous Labour government’s move towards more employability-focussed education and training. The government’s skills strategy placed its emphasis on improving the economy through skills improvement, noting that a “combination of poor employability skills and not having the vocational skills which

are relevant in the local labour market can prove a real barrier to entering and staying in work” (BIS, 2010a, p.33).

This is a move welcomed by representative employer bodies. The British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) notes that businesses want “schools and colleges to develop in their students the soft ‘employability’ skills that will enable them to function within an organisation and interact with managers, colleagues, customers and suppliers” (BCC, 2014, p.5). The BCC is “calling on all political parties to make an explicit pledge that employability, and real partnership with employers, should be at the heart of education and skills training” (ibid, p.10).

A global survey by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) suggested that future measures of success will not be made by collating numbers of degrees or how much countries spend on education, but by “the educational outcomes achieved and by their impact on economic and social progress” (OECD, 2010b, p.14). Individuals and employers now expect their education systems to be responsive, deliver quality and efficiency, provide flexibility, reduce barriers to entry and develop efficient and sustainable approaches to financing learning (ibid, pp.14-15).

This contemporary concept of FE delivering skills for employability has parallels, as well as differences, with the drive in the UK towards competency based education and training (CBET), particularly at the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, although arguably more explicitly and strongly focused on preparation for work. During this period, this “*unequivocally* behaviourist”<sup>8</sup> (Hyland, 1997, p.492) style of education was

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<sup>8</sup> I.e. “Descriptions of behaviour or performance that can be demonstrated or observed. Competent professional performance is viewed as a series of discrete elements of behaviour,” (Jones and Joss, 1995, p.27). “Competence is inferred and judged from observed behavioural outputs” (ibid).

“increasingly being scrutinised by criteria relating to specified performance in the world of work” (Harris, et al, 1995, p.9).

CBET is an educational process based on specific competencies that have been previously identified and has its main focus on what an individual can actually do in the workplace as measured against industry-specific standards (Kroehnert, 2000, p.220). The increasing development of CBET, although championed by the government as a means of measuring educational attainment, does not receive much praise in the academic literature. It was noted at the time that, despite academic concerns, CBET received substantial Department of Education and Employment support and continued “to influence practices from school to university without the benefit of any rationally justifiable philosophical foundation” (Hyland, 1997, p.491).

The concept of CBET has been described as a “slippery notion” (Garrick, 1998, p.55). It has been suggested that CBET as a form of education and learning “offers a mono-cultural view based on the satisfaction of narrow performance criteria and directed towards fixed and predetermined ends” (Hyland, 1995, p.52). The implementation of CBET may merely be a means of controlling and narrowly defining learning and knowledge; a standardisation of learning leaving no room for experimentation (Usher and Edwards, 2007, p.62-64).

Ensuring that employability skills are delivered through the education system has been high on the government’s agenda for some time. It remains frustrating to some that after many years the country is still discussing “a lack of ‘employability skills’, with education providers remaining focussed on qualifications targets rather than preparation for the workforce” (Wright, et al, 2010, pp.3-4). However, whilst the emphasis on individual competence for employability remains the same, there are differences in the current application of these skills.

Employability skills today are “not as narrowly prescribed and defined as in the past and generally they are more service oriented, making information and service skills increasingly important” (Greenbatch and Lewis, 2007, p.6). Employability skills “comprise a suite of ‘transferable’ skills which are independent of the occupational sectors and organisations in which individuals work” (ibid). Rather than merely defining a narrow field of competency, employability skills “must reflect the mix of skills, attributes and behaviours necessary to find and sustain employment” (Martin, et al, 2008, p.1). These skills should be seen “as a continuum of learning that supports job progression, not just entry into the workforce” (ibid). To truly respond to the challenges within the employment and skills system it has been argued that there needs to be an “agenda for change” (Wright, et al, 2010, p4), involving education providers delivering generic skills and greater collaboration between local employers and education (ibid, pp.4-5).

As has been discussed in the *competitive business* section earlier; businesses exist for a purpose. Employers, to varying degrees, recognise that, in order to help them fulfil their business purpose and continue to develop and survive; there is business value in training their employees. Employers want their training to meet their current business needs (Barrett and Mason, 2008, p.431). National Audit Office research outlined four themes that employers wanted from their training; a simple way of accessing advice on best skills training; training that meets business needs; incentives to train their staff more; and the ability to influence skills training without bureaucracy (NAO, 2005, p.14). The Chief Executive and founder of the New Engineering Foundation observed that “it is not training for the sake of training that is required; it is training for a purpose” (Medhat, 2010, p.17).

The National Audit Office research noted that “employers will only invest [in training] if they perceive there to be economic benefits and the training meets their needs”, whilst

adding that the “needs of the economy and of different industries and business sectors do not always coincide with the interests of individual employers” (NAO, 2005, p.14). It has been argued that vocational education and training strategies can be backward-looking and do not necessarily serve business and industry needs and that if policy and strategy addressed needs first, training requirements would naturally follow (Medhat, 2010, p.17). It is suggested that it is “the needs of business and industry that must define the purpose of learning provision” (Medhat, 2011, Online). Employer confidence in the ability of this to be delivered effectively through government initiatives is mixed and provides challenges for FE providers and educational policy-makers. Although there “are a core group of employers who view government support for training and development as important for their establishment, a far greater number see the role for government in this area as limited at best” (UKCES, 2011b, p.84).

A merging of employer need with national educational policy appears to be required in order to help prevent the UK from consistently lagging behind its international competitors in terms of economic performance and productivity (ibid, p.86). Stronger dialogue between employers and further educational establishments could support this. It is recognised that the “development of stronger relationships between colleges and employers can secure the right skills and aptitudes for today’s and tomorrow’s workforce...The skills we need to grow the economy and deliver prosperity can be developed most efficiently if colleges and employers work together” (UKCES, 157 Group and Gazelle Colleges, 2014, p.4).

An issue, potentially related to the perceived limitations of government understanding of employers’ training needs, is emerging in current literature regarding innovation and imagination when reviewing the relationship between FE and employers. This may be an issue resulting from the current practice by governments of wide layers of performance criteria within FE. The high levels and layers of performance

measurement and target monitoring within FE imply a lack of trust (Avis, 2005, p.212) and are not conducive towards producing an environment that readily fosters innovation. Some believe that, due to the high demands of performativity (i.e. optimising performance by maximising outputs and minimising costs<sup>9</sup>) demanded from FE, introducing creativity may be difficult. They argue that, despite “its supposed remit in feeding the knowledge economy, there is strong evidence to suggest that the environment now found in England’s FE colleges is unlikely to foster creativity in its teachers or students” (Simmons and Thompson, 2008, p.615). This is supported by others who suggest that performativity, “through its chain of targets and accountability, operates within a ‘blame culture’ where accountability becomes a means by which the institution can call to account its members” (Avis, 2005, p.212). There is no implication here that FE is not a creative sector, nor that individuals and institutions are not already innovative, merely that the potential for so much more could be being stifled by, as Avis himself terms it, “Fordist” practices<sup>10</sup> (ibid).

An understanding of the needs of the market and the importance of developing close FE college-employer relationships is vital;

“The development of market-based and employer focused education is expected to become an increasingly important driver for the sector. Social trends and enabling technologies create a need for increasingly personalised modes (in structure and content) for learners. This is particularly the case for Further Education and Higher Education, where higher fees focus the minds of learners on employability questions and return on investment”. (UKCES, 2014, p.xxiv).

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<sup>9</sup> A concept highlighted by Lyotard (see for example Lyotard, 1984, pp. 47-53). Rojek provides a useful discussion on Lyotard’s work, interpreting performativity as “a system of organization in which the value of conduct and worth of a system are judged by quantifiable external goals” (Rojek, 1998, p.17).

<sup>10</sup> I.e. Repetitive production, heavy supervision and control of practices, adversarial social and industrial relationships, following orders, impersonal rules and directives. See for example Beckett and Hager, 2002, p.75; Hancock and Tyler, 2001, p.40, et al.



Further Education needs to offer attractive and responsive products that best meet employers' needs, as well as increasing the employability of individuals. The Science in Parliament Journal suggested that "Further Education has to reinvent itself to become more innovative, efficient and market-led to drive new prosperity" (SIP, 2010, front cover). Bartley supports this concept, noting that "if there is to be a real flourishing in co-operation between colleges and employers then it will need imaginative, individually-focused initiatives" (Bartley, 2010, Online). The FE sector must find ways to balance performativity with innovativeness, as well as understand the needs of employers.

### **Summary and issues identified for further research**

This thesis is an investigation into the impact leaders of colleges of FE in England believe their organisations contribute towards business competitiveness. As a starting point, the literature review considered theory and study relating to the nature and structure of organisations. In order to understand the issues relating towards organisational competitiveness, external factors such as market forces and product lifecycles were examined. Complementing this, internal factors that could contribute towards a business competitive advantage were studied, including a focus on human capital, the nature of leadership and management, and the importance of a skilled and trained workforce. The literature review was completed with a brief summary of the recent evolution of further education and an understanding of the relationship FE has with employers and businesses.

From the evidence found and the body of work that already exists, it is clear that a successful and competitive business has an effective organisational design, strong leadership and management, a clearly communicated purpose and a motivated and trained workforce. In addition, it understands the marketplace and has current and evolving products that meet a market need.

What is clear from the evidence found to date and in the body of existing research is that there is very little material available from the perspective of FE leaders that can tangibly be related to the impact further education has made to business competitiveness. Beyond government policies, aspirational positioning papers, or economic impact measures, it is difficult to locate the voice of further education leaders behind any evidence of business success, or otherwise.

As a result of the literature review, and with the aim of contributing to the field of research and knowledge in this area, the author proposes to investigate this subject first-hand. The literature review has directly impacted upon the original tentative research question that was proposed at the outset of this study. The tentative proposal was one that asked *what contribution to UK business competitiveness do colleges of further education make?* (Maykels, 2009, p.1). Having reflected upon the focus of the topic as a result of conducting the preceding literature review, the focus of the overarching research question has been refined to one that moved from a broad perspective, potentially involving businesses, policy makers, FE providers, and other stakeholders, to one that will focus on the perspectives and viewpoints of FE leaders. Primary research will be planned and undertaken with further education leaders, such as college Principals, Deputy Principals and employer-focussed senior directors. The evolution of knowledge can often be reached by taking incremental steps towards a new understanding, and as such, the research question will be tested further as the research process continues. Further refinements will be reflected upon in **Chapter 5**.

Prior to commencing this research, a review and discussion of related research aspects will now be conducted. This will involve philosophical discussion regarding research aspects, as well as a review of ontological, epistemological, positivistic and other research perspectives. This will enable the primary research methodology to be

guided by an understanding of appropriate research methods and thinking, allowing for a valid set of data, analysis and considerations to be made on this subject.

It is anticipated that the primary research will look at developing wider knowledge of the perceptions leaders within FE colleges in England believe they make towards business competitiveness; mismatch or alignment between services available and business need; examples of existing good or bad practice; and highlight possible gaps in theory and practice, or in policy and implementation.

As a result of the primary research, a review of the suggested model introduced earlier in this section will be made and evolved as necessary.

## **Chapter 3 – Research methodology**

The focus of this work is *an investigation into the impact leaders of colleges of further education in England believe their organisations contribute towards business competitiveness.*

It would be inappropriate to conduct research into this subject without first understanding key factors that may impact upon the research methodology. These include ethical choices, philosophical implications, limitations and drawbacks, and the importance of considered research design. This chapter will provide that investigation and understanding through an analysis of theory regarding research techniques and methodology, which will help determine the focus for primary research.

It is recognised that within the boundaries of this thesis, it would not be possible to provide a detailed investigation into all aspects of research theory and debate. The content of this research methodology chapter therefore will focus on areas considered to be relevant to the research question. As such, it is recognised that this chapter may be both strengthened and limited by the narrowed nature of this focus.

### **Initial assumptions**

In order to begin to reach any meaningful conclusions, the intention is for this research to seek to understand the perception and impact of initiatives and activity delivered by FE to businesses in England. It is initially assumed that this information will be sourced from a suitable population sample taken from those with leadership responsibility working within FE colleges. It is anticipated that this will involve a pilot study and a main phase to the process, as well as the possibility of a further process, to be determined upon analysis of the findings received.

The assumption, prior to an analysis taken of research methodologies, is that the exploration of the match between business needs and the range of courses/products offered by FE colleges will be looked at. Research into whether funding or financial incentives influence this offer will be considered. The nature of dialogue and communications between FE colleges, businesses and government will be investigated. The research will also seek to understand whether the supply of skills provided by FE colleges not only meets the needs and demands of employers and businesses, but also delivers benefits to increase their competitiveness. Strengths and weaknesses as a result of the findings obtained will also be considered.

It was anticipated at the start that this research would lead to a quantitative and qualitative analysis of several issues relating to the impact leaders of colleges of further education believe they have on businesses in England. This chapter will provide a foundation for researching these issues.

These assumptions will be reflected upon at the end of this chapter, when a recommended research design and methodology, based on a study of appropriate research literature, will be made.

## **Knowledge**

It is anticipated that the contribution this research will make towards knowledge may not only add value to the field of learning on this subject, but also provide opportunities for further research, discussion, and practical application opportunities. As such, it is important to choose a meaningful and proven research design and methodology that is suitable for meeting this purpose.

It has been said that a “researcher’s task in choosing a technique through which to answer a research question is one of the most important decisions of a research

project” (Stage and Manning, 2003, p.19). It is the responsibility of the researcher, not just to themselves, but to the advancement of knowledge, to choose a research approach or model that is relevant to the nature of the research planned (McMurray et al, 2004, p.44). At its fundamental level, the purpose of research can be *basic* or *applied* (McNabb, 2010, p.3). *Basic* research is theoretical and “is conducted to increase the general storehouse of knowledge” (ibid). Also known as pure, theoretical, or scientific research; *basic* research, “particularly if quantitative in nature, is usually designed so as to produce new knowledge” of a general nature (Powell, 1997, p.2). *Applied* research is conducted to “help solve practical problems” (McNabb, 2010, p.3). It is research that “uses scientific methodology to develop information to help solve an immediate, yet usually persistent, societal problem” (Bickman and Rog, 1998, p.v).

There is a body of work that exists and which continues to grow and evolve regarding the fundamental understanding of the basic nature of knowledge. Whilst of considerable value, this thinking journeys beyond the area and the confines of this research topic. Due to the depth of philosophical and epistemological discussion that would need to be covered in order to do knowledge theory justice, it is acknowledged that the following commentary has limitations. A brief overview is considered here in order to provide a context within which decisions as to the proposed method of research can be understood.

Epistemological requirements for knowledge are founded on the understanding that “a prerequisite for possessing knowledge is that one has a belief in the relevant proposition, and that that belief must be true” (Pritchard, 2006, p.4). For knowledge to exist, “besides the truth of the belief in question, its method of acquisition must rule out all relevant possibilities of error” (Hendricks, 2006, p.2). The basis of knowledge is agreement, due to the fact that without the belief in knowledge conducted by others, it

would be impossible for us to personally experience all the things we need to know (Babbie, 2010, p.3).

Utilising these concepts, it is possible to base research upon this tripartite definition of knowledge – that it is *justified*, built on *belief* and that the belief is *true* (O'Brien, 2006, p.11). However, absolute certainty in truth or belief is almost impossible to know. To this end, epistemology has also been defined as the study of “the possibility of knowledge” and how prone we are to make mistakes (Hendricks, 2006, p.1). The degree to which something can be believed to be true and justified is *progress* towards the possibility of knowledge. It is difficult to argue a case for absolute certainty of knowledge as it is “possible for a person to be justified in believing a proposition that is in fact false” (Gettier, 1963, p.121). As the conditions for absolute certainty rely on beliefs or truths that themselves may be uncertain, almost every contemporary theory of justification aims only to present the conditions for putting the believer in the best position for receiving the truth (Zagzebski, 1994, p.73).

Concepts such as ‘truth’ or ‘belief’ can be argued from many philosophical viewpoints, and again these discussions extend beyond the confines of this research topic. It is worth noting though, that research can often be conducted in incremental degrees, building upon, or challenging, existing and accepted patterns and knowledge. It can be faithful to the time and societal conditions within which it is formed, and yet evolve or indeed drastically alter, should future conditions or circumstances change.

Kuhn, from a scientific perspective, termed this incremental unfolding of knowledge around an existing subject a “paradigm” (1962, p.23). Distinguishing this term from meaning an accepted pattern or model, Kuhn used it as an object to define the continuous unfolding of knowledge around a subject, which builds into an “object for further articulation and specification” (ibid, pp.23-24) as learning conditions change.

This concept of knowledge progression is supported by many, for example through suggestions that “progress moves from existing knowledge toward more fully confirmed answers to new questions scientists put to nature” (Lundberg and Young, 2005, p.47). A paradigm therefore evolves over time. When it reaches a point where the foundations that previously held the paradigm unravel, a new way of thinking emerges and a paradigm shift occurs, opening the way to a new one (Kliem, 2004, p.27).

### **Knowledge summary and recommendation**

This research therefore, whilst acknowledging philosophical debate regarding absolute certainty of knowledge, will continue from the viewpoint that the information received, and conclusions drawn from this information, will be true and faithful to itself and part of an incremental progress towards the field of knowledge and understanding.

### **Ethical issues**

Research can be undertaken for many reasons. It may be for personal reasons, institutional ones, driven by corporate desire, or pursued for collective need. Whatever the purpose or drive though, research, if it is to have any substance or validity, must be conducted in good faith, with integrity and with strong ethical standards. Research is driven “by the desire to advance knowledge and understanding (on our part, and, if we are lucky, on behalf of others)...the conduct of the research itself has to be subject to the practice of the intellectual and moral habits intrinsic to the conduct of research” (Gregory, 2003, pp.14-15).

Regardless of its purpose, research must always “be conducted and understood through an ethical lens, which sees research participants as worthy of respect and protection, and considers that the purpose of the research is ultimately to try to benefit humankind” (Vanderstoep and Johnston, 2009, p.23). It can be argued that there are different aspects to ethics – those of agreed conduct (which can to some extent be



openly identified and collectively agreed upon) and those of the personal morality of the individual researcher (which can be less tangible). This perspective is drawn from a viewpoint that suggests that:

“Ethics in research has two dimensions: one is “research ethics” and defines the rules of how research should be conducted, especially when it involves animals or human beings, whereas “researcher’s ethics” has to do with the researcher’s own moral obligations, e.g. to be honest and objective in presenting and interpreting his/her own research, to be fair to peer researchers, and honest to the society as a whole.”

(Dahlquist, 2006, p.449)

Some practices, such as fraud, purposeful dishonesty, intent to deceive, are relatively straightforward to question from an ethical viewpoint (Penslar, 1995, p.xiii). Other practices, such as selective inclusion of data or timing of presentation of data are more subtle and difficult to identify (ibid). Value conflicts can occur during data findings that differ from those anticipated and a moral dimension, underpinned by the social values of a researcher can lead to selective data inclusion (Greenbank, 2003, p.796).

Selective use or removal of data could occur in research, for example “when researchers have asked the participants to answer a number of questions and some of the analyzed data support the research questions or hypothesis and others do not. In such cases, some researchers have reported only those results that supported their work” (Cottrell and McKenzie, 2011, p.112). It is difficult to wholly prevent dishonesty, as not every individual has the same moral code. However, an ethical researcher is one who “truthfully reports and fully discloses research data and the methods whereby the data were generated” (Monsen, 2008, p.33), regardless of whether the results agree or conflict with the direction the researcher initially supported.

Selective inclusion of data is also not necessarily confined to a deliberate choice to mislead, or bias result findings. Subtleties of selective inclusion can also take place during the data synthesis (or literature research) stage. Potential for unconscious selective data inclusion includes *language bias* (i.e. only searching English text resources); *cost bias* (i.e. only searching free or relatively cheap data sources); or *familiarity bias* (i.e. only searching through resources from one's own discipline) (Rothstein and Hopewell, 2009, p.105). It is also noted from the above that researchers analysing relevant theories as part of their research synthesis "need to ensure they conduct as comprehensive a search as possible to keep themselves from introducing bias into their work" (ibid, p.106).

Whilst every effort must be taken towards impartiality, it can be very difficult for a researcher's past knowledge, values and beliefs to be set aside during a research project. Indeed, it may well be the pre-existing interest in the topic that has prompted the further investigation in the first place. As such, it is worth noting that the possibility exists that it is the researcher's "philosophical orientation towards research which generates the particular form of knowledge (or research conclusions)" (Daymon and Holloway, 2010, p.99), which can then be further challenged or built upon by others. This pre-existing interest, whilst having the potential for introducing bias into research, is also recognised by some as essential to their *commitment* to research. As has been noted, "research without personal commitment lacks an essential source of motivation and is likely to be deprived of experiential insight" (Reinharz, 1985, p.142). It is also worth noting that "to deny that a researcher has a point of view is itself a point of view" (Neuman, 2000, p.81).

The integrity and honesty of a researcher will be tested in the honest and true recording and transparency of the research findings – particularly so should the data not support the hypothesis (Perkins and Sampath, 1996, p.55). At some point, the

integrity of the researcher must be allowed for, and the onus put on the researcher's shoulders to evidence the findings as they perceive them, despite any pre-conceived opinions or bias.

When a researcher is dishonest as the result of fabrication or falsification of data, or of plagiarism, or selective publication of results, it needs to be recognised that it is the character of the researcher that produces the lack of integrity (Drowatzky, 1996, p.13). It is acknowledged that there is a responsibility put on the individual researcher to conduct their work using high ethical standards. There is also an element of trust provided to the researcher by the wider community that assumes an ethical code of conduct has been practised.

Whilst definitions regarding ethical standards and their interpretation may be open to debate, "researchers are expected to uphold ethical standards as part of their membership in a professional community" (Neuman, 2000, p.101). Although measures such as educational and professional guidelines, or peer review checks and challenges can help ensure good research practice takes place, "researchers themselves are ultimately responsible for ensuring the integrity of research data (National Academy of Sciences, 2009, p.4).

The agreed use of guidelines, whether company, institutional, national, or otherwise can provide standards to which a researcher should follow, and is recommended good practice (see for example: ASA, 1999 pp.1-10; BERA, 2011, pp.1-12; SRA, 2003, pp.1-66). Within the United Kingdom, the Economic and Social Research Council<sup>11</sup> (ESRC)

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<sup>11</sup> The Economic and Social Research Council is the principal funding agency for UK social science research. The Council requires that the research it supports is designed and conducted in such a way that it meets certain ethical principles and is subject to proper professional and institutional oversight in terms of research governance. The Research Ethics Framework was introduced in 2006 and revised in 2012 to reflect developments in legislation and research ethics. Online 9 August 2011 at: <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/>

publishes a research ethics framework in order to help UK social science research aspire to high ethical standards. The framework has six guiding principles for the conduct of ethical research. These include integrity, quality and transparency; clear purpose and intent; confidentiality and anonymity; voluntary participation; avoidance of harm and research should be independent (ESRC, 2012, pp.2-3).

### **Ethical conclusions and recommendations**

This research document will follow ethical guidelines, including those published by the University of Bolton (UoB) which has its own research ethics framework that includes ethics review and approval procedures (UoB, 2006a, pp.1-3), as well as guidelines for informed consent (UoB, 2006b, pp.1-3). Although the researcher works within the field of Further Education, this is viewed as a positive situation which supports the commitment to this research. There are no pre-conceived outcomes and there is no intent to provide a bias into the research findings. From an ethical perspective, the findings will be presented as the researcher interprets them, with full transcripts to evidence transparency and honesty, as well as provide the opportunity for peer interpretation or further research in the future.

### **Qualitative and quantitative research**

In order to understand the nature and issues around the impact further education leaders of colleges in England believe their organisations can have upon business competitiveness, research will need to be undertaken, assumptions tested and interpretations and conclusions made. It is said that the “basic thrust of all research is to solve problems and to expand knowledge” (Taylor, 2005, p.4), and this thesis will follow that purpose.

It is suggested that qualitative researchers “reflect some sort of phenomenological perspective” (Newman and Benz, 1998, p.2); in other words, that multiple

interpretations or viewpoints can be identified by different researchers; all of which may be equally valid. Qualitative research relies on the collection of “nonnumerical data such as words and pictures” (Johnson and Christensen, 2012, p.33) and is “commonly used to understand people’s experiences and to express their perspectives” (ibid). Qualitative research is “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p.4). This research can range “from a short list of responses to open-ended questions in an online questionnaire to more complex data such as transcripts of in-depth interviews or entire policy documents” (Saunders, et al, 2009, p.480). From an educational perspective, a qualitative research approach can aid in discovering how those involved perceive their situations and experiences to currently be. “Establishing ‘what it is’ can be achieved through qualitative research which accounts for the social context and the dynamic interactions between the persons involved and the adjustments they make as a response to changes” (Hartas, 2010, p.27).

Qualitative research is a researcher’s interpretation of data from a world as interpreted by their respondents’ perceptions. By contrast, quantitative researchers tend to emphasise that “there is a common reality on which people can agree” (Newman and Benz, 1998, p.2). In quantitative research “more control and objectivity can be exercised” (Taylor, 2005, p.6) as this research is “usually expressed as scores and measures which yield numerical data” (ibid, p.3).

It has been suggested that there are “two main routes in conducting quantitative research, namely group comparison and exploration of relationships among variables” (Hartas, 2010, p.66). From a quantitative perspective, it is essential that the population that is to be researched is effectively established, as this is the identified group that will share the characteristics of the group being studied. As it is rare for a 100% study of a population to be achieved, an appropriate sample size will be taken from the overall

population from which assumptions will then be made of the whole. In order to generalise these assumptions “from the sample to the population, the sample has to be representative of the population from which it was drawn” (ibid, p.67). An ideal research study involves “selecting cases from the population at random (by chance) to form your sample” (Gorard, 2001, p.11). Quantitative approaches are useful for identifying *descriptive* (e.g. “How many...”; “Is achievement going up...”) or *inferential* (e.g. “What factors are related to...”; “Is there a relationship between...”) data (Muijs, 2011, pp. 6-7).

The above analysis is not intended to favour a quantitative approach above a qualitative one, or vice-versa. Indeed, there are those who believe that both approaches are compatible (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998, p.5). In order to enhance research analysis, it is often recommended that, if possible, more than one research approach to a problem or situation is used. From a research perspective, the approach favoured or chosen should be the one most appropriate to the research problem under study. This does not mean that a research solution “must always employ a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods” (Brewer and Hunter, 2006, p.63). Sometimes a research solution may “be better served by combining two types of quantitative methods (e.g., a survey and an experiment), or of qualitative methods (e.g., a field study and textual analysis of archival documents) (ibid).

It has been suggested that “qualitative data and analysis function as the glue that cements the interpretation” of these mixed-method results (Jick, 1979, p.609). “In one respect, qualitative data are used as the critical counterpoint to quantitative methods. In another respect, the analysis benefits from the perceptions drawn from personal experiences and firsthand observations” (ibid). This multi-method approach to research will be examined more closely in the next section that considers the concept of *triangulation*.

### **Quantitative and qualitative research conclusions and recommendations**

The most appropriate approach for this research work will be one that focuses on a qualitative approach. The whole purpose is to form an interpretation based on the viewpoints of FE leaders as to their beliefs. Placing the researcher within a suitable sample of leaders from the world of FE and obtaining responses relating to their experiences and perspectives will allow for an appropriate understanding of their world. Consideration of the multi-method approach to enhance research analysis has been made, and this qualitative approach will be complemented by a quantitative survey of appropriate variables to enhance the qualitative findings.

### **Triangulation and mixed methods approaches**

Triangulation is a term used to “name the combination of different methods, study groups, local and temporal settings, and different theoretical perspectives in dealing with a phenomenon” (Flick, 2009, p.444). Triangulation has been defined as “the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behaviour” (Cohen, et al, 2007, p.141). It is the “analytic act of identifying similar findings from different data sets. Essentially, this suggests seeing the same “research event” from different perspectives” (Trauth, 2001, p.165). The process of triangulation “is a principle that applies to all types of research designs...It refers to situations in which researchers are confronted with a multiplicity of imperfect measurement options, each having advantages and disadvantages” (Rubin and Babbie, 2011, p.298). It is often referred to as a *mixed methods* process due to the fact that triangulating data involves viewing it from more than one perspective. This mixed methods approach to data study has been defined as “an intellectual and practical synthesis based on qualitative and quantitative research...It recognizes the importance of traditional quantitative and qualitative research but also offers a powerful third paradigm choice that often will provide the most informative, complete, balanced and useful research results” (Johnson et al, 2007, p.129).

It has been suggested that “no item of information ought to be accepted that cannot be verified from at least two sources” (Guba, 1981, p.85) and that different methods, for example, questionnaires, interviews, and documentary analyses, should be used when possible (ibid). Denzin noted that the combination of multiple methods into a single study “will better enable the sociologist to forge valid propositions that carefully consider relevant rival causal factors” (Denzin, 2009, p.27). Triangulation, through use of “different sources, different methods and sometimes multiple investigators” will, in probability, lead to more credible findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p.307).

The use of a mixed methods approach has not been without its theoretical drawbacks. A key drawback, it has been argued, is that the use of triangulation in social research has been misleading. It has “usually been concerned with reducing error or bias rather than simply establishing the existence of some phenomenon, or values on some variable” (Blaikie, 1991, p.123). Blaikie asserts that to use methods drawn from different methodological perspectives (e.g. a *positivist*, or observable and measurable approach and an *interpretive*, or dialogical understanding of actions and situations approach) can cause “considerable confusion” (ibid, p.131) as, fundamentally, combining the approaches must challenge different interpretations of what constitutes knowledge.

A review of the research literature suggests that triangulation can potentially add value to a research problem through uncovering differences between findings purely from the data itself collected and *inferences* (or conclusions) drawn from an interpretation of the data findings. Inferences are conclusions “made on the basis of obtained data. Such a conclusion may or may not be acceptable to other scholars, and is subject to evaluation” (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2008, p.104). If the results provide consistent or convergent information in a mixed methods study where different methods are utilised to study the same phenomenon, then confidence in inquiry inferences is increased



(Greene, 2007, p.100). Inferences obtained from mixed methods studies can combine to create a stronger, integrated inference (or meta-inference). This integration involves “making meaningful inferences on the basis of consistent and/or inconsistent results” (Tashakkori, et al, 2010, p.54). An inference therefore, as with any subjective conclusion, can be open to challenge and interpretation. However, the stronger the representative sample taken within the data analysis, the greater the likelihood is that the inferences drawn will have merit.

The methods chosen when designing research can be various, although the nature and focus of the research will usually lead naturally to the most appropriate research method. A solution to potential conflict resulting from methodological approaches suggests that it is the *outcome* rather than the process itself that has epistemological value. Establishing integrated relationships “does not in itself imply anything about what can be claimed; such claims are made on the basis of the researchers’ theoretical perspectives and their positions on, for instance, triangulation and complexity” (Moran-Ellis, et al, 2006, p.56). From a sociological perspective, it is important that the researcher chooses “the most appropriate methods or techniques which allow them to carry out the study” (Giddens and Sutton, 2010, p.43).

### **Triangulation and mixed methods approaches conclusion and recommendation**

This research will adhere to the belief that the purpose of the research should always guide the choice of research method. It is understood that the researcher “should always select the appropriate research method on a basis of a consideration of the research question(s) of interest, the objective(s) of the research, time and cost constraints, available populations, the possibility (or not) of the manipulation of an independent variable, and the availability of data (Johnson and Christensen, 2012, p.52). As such, the mixed methods quantitative and qualitative approach, identified in the previous section, remains the most appropriate path to follow.

## **Research philosophy**

Research “makes basic philosophical assumptions about existence (ontology), knowledge (epistemology), value (axiology), and the good (ethics)” (Wertz, et al, 2011, p.80). Paradigms, or agreed understanding of knowledge or belief systems, which may alter over time, have been previously discussed in this thesis as part of the literature review. Paradigms for research, from a philosophical perspective include positivistic, interpretivistic and critical scientific (postmodernist) approaches.

Positivists, holds the ontological belief “that an objective reality exists” (Daymon and Holloway, 2010, p.101). In contrast, interpretivists hold the ontological belief in “the existence of multiple realities and truths which are open to change because the social world, not having a separate existence from the individual, is socially constructed” (ibid, p.102).

At its simplest, positivism “follows the approach of a natural scientist; in contrast interpretivism leaves room for the details of the situation, subjective interpretation of meanings, and a resulting social constructionism” (Frauendorf, 2006, p.149).

Postmodernism, a term that has been around for many years, is still evolving in terms of definition and understanding. Postmodernism “encourages attempts to deconstruct taken-for-granted meaning by exploring contradictions in the scientific literature and highlights the importance of historical, cultural and political forces which influence the research process” (Klenke, 2008, p.14). Postmodernism emphasises the viewpoint that “all research is context specific and understandable (if at all) as a snapshot of one time, one place, and one set of particulars (Ginsberg and Mertens, 2009, p.581).

Whereas there is much (unresolved) debate as to the validity or appropriateness of one philosophical approach as opposed to another, it is important to understand the philosophical foundations of various paradigms so that research methods “match our

belief systems, and so that the research approach is appropriate for answering research questions within the context of existing knowledge” (Heppner, et al, 2008, p.4).

There have certainly been many conflicting opinions, debates and discussions in the research literature between the various merits of quantitative and qualitative methodology. It has been suggested that a difficulty “in representing the divergences between the two methodologies, derives from a tendency for philosophical issues and technical issues to be treated simultaneously and occasionally to be confused” (Bryman, 1984, p.75). Philosophical issues, as Bryman notes, “relate to questions of epistemology, i.e. the appropriate foundation for the study of society and its manifestations. By contrast, technical issues bespeak the consideration of the superiority or appropriateness of the methods of research in relation to one another” (ibid).

Although conflicting philosophical views exist, the debate and opposing perspectives can have a beneficial, rather than a negative impact upon the research approach. Understanding different philosophical opinions and views “can allow for expansion, tolerance, and inclusion in research thinking and methodology instead of rivalry and exclusivity” (Swanson, 2005, p.18).

Philosophically, is any approach or belief system more or less appropriate, or valid, than another? Sometimes, the simplest conclusions may be the most appropriate. It could be argued that the research should speak for itself and that others should discuss its philosophical worth. As long as a viewpoint and purpose to the research exists, the ontological debates are unlikely to be resolved. In the end, “research rigor and impact, not philosophical debate as to worthiness of various research paradigms

comprise the true grist of active scholars” (Swanson, 2005, p.18). As Swanson reflects; “let time test the ultimate integrity of the inquiry” (ibid).

### **Research philosophy conclusion and recommendation**

This research will focus on a subjective interpretation of individuals’ beliefs and perceived truths. Viewpoints and responses will be received without judgement or a belief that there can only be one truth to be found as the solution to the research problem. The findings will be presented following a natural social constructivism of these multiple beliefs and viewpoints and will form a primarily interpretivistic approach.

### **Research design**

Research design involves the process of focussing your perspective for the purposes of a particular study (Babbie, 2010, p.117). An understanding of the nature of the research issue or problem that requires investigation should be made before undertaking the research. This understanding can help to determine the way the research can be designed and help to lead to beneficial results. It has been suggested that research is “the exploration through experience of relations between our interpretations of the past and the ongoing nature of things” (Greer, 1969, p.160). Greer believed that the link between observation and formulation; of interpreting and operationalising concepts was one of the most difficult and crucial tasks facing the researcher (ibid).

There is no single blueprint for planning research design – each problem is unique and research design should be governed by the notion of *fitness for purpose* (Cohen, et al, 2007, p.78). Simply put, the best research model for a particular issue is “the one that most accurately answers the question you are asking” (Salkind, 2011, p.8). Salkind notes that it is unlikely that there is one model or research method that is the perfect fit for answering a question; often a mixed methods approach is best (ibid). Good

research design should also prevent the researcher from following pre-conceived assumptions. This approach to research design should allow for the possibility of alternative perspectives and also help “protect researchers from lapses in objectivity and the bias inherent in personal judgement” (Weathington, et al., 2010, p.266).

It may seem to be stating the obvious, but it is important that the research design takes place before the research itself commences. The main reasons for this include the fact that it will help to make the research design decisions explicit; help ensure the decisions are consistent with each other and the ontological beliefs; and allow for critical evaluation of the design elements and overall design before significant research has commenced (Blaikie, 2010, p.36). When looking at the fundamental requirements of research design, Blaikie suggests that there are three initial basic questions that need to be answered:

- “WHAT will be studied?
- WHY will it be studied?
- HOW will it be studied?

“The last question can be broken down into four further questions.

- “WHAT research strategy will be used?
- WHERE will the data come from?
- HOW will the data be collected and analysed?
- WHEN will each stage of the research be carried out?”

(ibid, p.42)

If these questions can be answered satisfactorily, it should then be possible to be clear about a way forward for research design. A suggestion along lines similar to those proposed by Blaikie offers the thought that;

- “...research design must, at least, contain - (a) a clear statement of the research problem; (b) procedures and techniques for gathering

information; (c) the population to be studied and (d) methods to be used in processing and analysing data” (Kothari, 2004, p.32).

In addition to understanding the problem to be researched, there are other decisions that can also impact upon the research design. Research design includes decisions “as to the setting in which the research is to be undertaken, the relevant variables to be included, and whether or not the researcher controls or manipulates critical features of the situation” (Crano and Brewer, 2002, p.16). In addition, the process of data gathering and collection must be considered. For example, how the variables of interest are to be assessed, and what the respective roles of the researcher and subjects are to be in the research process (ibid).

It is important that the approach to research matches “the requirements of the research questions posed” (Blaikie, 2010, p.39). The nature of the research questions to be addressed will have an important effect on the research methods chosen (Hall, 2008, p.76). The nature of the research design therefore should be one that matches possible strengths and weaknesses with the needs of the research question; one that will enable the type of knowledge required to be provided at a particular time in history (Heppner, et al, 2008, p.78).

The overarching research problem statement “guides the research questions, which guide the selection of research methods” (Pavlish and Pharris, 2012, p.125). These questions need to be “formulated carefully so they embody the aims of the research, as the design must be crafted around these questions” (Hall, 2008, p.76). Research questions “are not like ordinary questions. They are somewhat inquisitorial in that they expect an answer (not necessarily a reply)” (Andrews, 2003, p.2). Interestingly, as Andrews notes, sometimes some questions are too large, or broad, to be answered by

the research itself. In these instances, a broad aim can be refined down to a manageable question, often during the first stages of research, but sometimes during the course of the research itself (ibid, p.4). From a qualitative perspective, “research questions and designs are messy, flexible, and not always predictable” (Padgett, 1998, p.28) due to the degree of discretion, creativity and decision-making the researcher is provided with.

Planning and carefully considering the approach to research design does have its benefits. Some of the key benefits include the fact that the overall research becomes an integrated project with a start and an end point; that there is an opportunity to conceptualise the research idea, define the research problem and describe the theoretical and methodological frameworks; and that it provides an opportunity for peer review and assessment (Kelly, 2004, p.142). The reverse also applies. Poorly designed research “will lead to inaccurate conclusions, which may hurt the populations to which it is applied” (Aguinis and Henle, 2002, p.36). Poorly designed research that leads to such conclusions can also be described as unethical, due to the damage and/or wasted resources and time they could cause (Myers and Hansen, 2012, pp.38-39).

Assuming careful research design has been made, it is possible to consider maximising benefits and minimising potential risks prior to implementation. Although it is rare to attempt to quantify the risks and benefits of a particular research study, an assessment of benefit and risk factors can be made (Gilner and Morgan, 2009, p.38). This can be particularly important if there could be potential harm to participants, or vulnerable individuals are involved, and potential risks or benefits, where identified, should be clearly explained in any prior consent form. It is worth noting that, although taking steps to minimise risks and enhance benefits during the research design stage is recommended, nothing can be completely guaranteed. Some risks and benefits

“cannot be identified accurately before the research is performed...It is impossible to consider all possible risks and benefits” (Sieber, 1992, pp.75-76). Good research design should therefore attempt to minimise potential risks to participants, and maximise the potential contribution to knowledge through the benefits and validity of appropriate and well-considered research methods.

### **Research design summary and conclusions**

The research design will be made on the basis of supporting the most appropriate methodological approach that is relevant to the research topic. The design will be guided by the research question and will help minimise any lack of objectivity by ensuring the questions posed and the scope for responses will allow for multiple perspectives from research participants. This approach will allow for the results and conclusions drawn to best interpret answers to the question posed.

### **Limitations of research**

The use and understanding of research and research methods can be a powerful tool. Research “permits us to challenge accepted truths, to ask upsetting questions, to probe in our own distinctive styles uncharted ways” (Lambert, 1992, p.541). It must also be noted though that all “proposed research projects have limitations: none is perfectly designed” (Marshall and Rossman, 2011, p.76). Studies are conducted from the researcher’s chosen perspective and, whilst the findings may be applicable within other contexts, the chosen perspective naturally places initial boundaries and limitations on the research. An acknowledgement of this fact “reminds the reader that the study is bounded and situated in a specific context. The reader, then, can make decisions about its usefulness for other settings” (ibid, p.77).

In addition to the nature of perspective within research, there will be other limitations. It has been observed that; “no research is perfect. Flaws and limitations may result from



the nature of the question that is being asked” (Marlow and Boone, 2007, p.295). In other words, the origin of the initial question may, from the political, personal, or social viewpoint of the author, have built in limitations from the start. This can be difficult to assess, particularly if the nature of the question is such that a large body of work on the subject is unavailable in order to offer an alternative balance to the viewpoint. If it is accepted that all research to some extent has its limitations, then research that refers to the work of others (which through this assumption will also include its own limitations) may compound this factor. Obviously, through careful questioning, analysis, application and consideration, steps to reduce the degree of limitation (if known) can be taken. Nevertheless, one of the “most fruitful sources of research problems is prior research, because the findings of all research projects have limitations” (Monette, et al, 2014, p.78).

It has been recognised that an important benefit of conducting prior research, often referred to as a pilot study, is that it is very difficult to develop an understanding of the concepts and theories held by the people you are studying until the study has actually begun. It helps provide a shape to the meanings and perspectives held by the study group and as such, can help influence, develop and change the initial theoretical research framework (Maxwell, 2013, p.67). Pilot studies “are strongly advisable, to discover and smooth out problems and to refine techniques” (Banister, et al, 2011, p.66). Pilot studies can also help improve the nature of the evidence sought or questions asked, for example, by reducing the risk of choosing questions that do not lead to meaningful answers, or of asking questions that could be misinterpreted. Time and care invested by including a pilot research stage can strengthen the value of the research, help improve the validity of the data collected and bolster confidence in the conclusions drawn (Monette, et al, 2014, p.9).

Limitations can also occur when deciding on population sample size. Researchers are “dependent on the goodwill and availability of respondents, and it will probably be difficult for an individual researcher working on a small-scale project to achieve a true random sample” (Bell, 2010, pp.149-150). Bell acknowledges that sometimes a researcher, particularly on small scale studies that are also constrained by limitations of time, has to make do with the best they can. On those occasions, representative opportunity samples from the available population are generally acceptable, provided that the make-up of the sample is clearly stated and the limitations of the data are realised (ibid). The nature of each individual research project should guide the research approach. The type of sampling selected for a research project “will be dependent on the research method selected, the goals of the research and the availability of population-specific information” (Brewerton and Millward, 2003, p.120). The level of representativeness of a sample (i.e. how closely it resembles and represents the population as a whole) will limit the generalisation of the findings (ibid).

Surveys themselves can have limitations, particularly for the study of behaviour. It is important when conducting research through surveys not to confuse what people say they do with what they *actually* do when receiving replies from respondents. These can sometimes, incorrectly, be used interchangeably (Bryman and Bell, 2007, p.282). For example, respondents may misremember, or feel obliged to answer from an ideal perspective, rather than one based on reality.

Researchers’ own experience may also be a limiting factor within research. An over-familiarity with the subject could lead to potential assumptions being made, whereas a lack of familiarity could lead to a fundamental omission or lack of acceptance by those closer to the nature of the subject being studied. Whether the researcher believes there is one truth to be found, or multiple possibilities, it will be their experiences and perspective that determines and limits the nature of their study and the interpretation of

their findings. For credibility, it can be argued that there is an “epistemological assumption that researchers need to have sufficient grounding in the culture of the communities in which they work, as well as recognise the limitations of their grounding, to conduct research in ways that are viewed as credible and useful to members of those communities” (Mertens, et al, 2011, p.231). This view is supported by the suggestion that “when selecting a research problem, you should be familiar with the subject area through your own interest in it...However, the formulation of your study must be flexible enough to allow for as many patterns of the phenomenon being examined as possible” (Cargan, 2007, p.24).

A further problem with familiarity of a research subject is “the more familiar you are with a subject, the more difficult it is to explain to others with no knowledge of that subject...you may fail to explain something that you assume the reader will know. Even worse, you may leave out important material that should be included” (Saunders, et al, 2009, pp.526). It would seem that both a familiarity and a lack of familiarity with the subject can potentially be limiting factors; either case should be noted within the context of the research.

Important research limitations can include the *tools* (i.e. the methodological approaches as well as the technological or physical facilities available), the *shared view of the world* (i.e. limitations caused by assumed collective agreement) and *personal psychological limitations* (such as fear of making mistakes) (Ray, 2006, p.378). The researcher themselves may also be a limiting factor when it comes to their interpretation of results. Interpretations “are just that, interpretations; other people may interpret the results rather differently. Interpretive problems may arise whether statistical tests have been used or the data are qualitative” (Marlow and Boone, 2007, p.296).

Despite the fact that there can be limitations to research, this should not prevent the research itself from taking place. Limitations should be recognised and acknowledged within the research design, and the research conducted within that understanding. As the next section highlights, there are benefits to having made careful consideration when planning research design. An understanding of potential limitations when planning the research design should help to offset these limitations against the potential benefits.

### **Research limitations summary and recommendations**

It is acknowledged that, as an individual working with the field of this research topic, there is the potential that an over-familiarity with the subject could lead to research limitations; either through making assumptions or omissions in the presentation. It is believed that an awareness of this possibility prior to commencement of the work should help to guide the structure of the research questions and areas of the subject material for inclusion and help to minimise or remove this potential limitation. As an attempt to reduce the impact of these limitations, a pilot research stage will be introduced. This will allow for reflection and refinements before the main phase. This should help to minimise risks of assumptions or over-familiarity, as well as provide an opportunity to check that the evidence being sought could provide meaningful responses and that the questions are understood by the research subjects. At the outset, it is planned that a significant and meaningful research sample will be achieved, in order to provide a true random sample of value. However, it is acknowledged that, through lack of good-will, or the nature of time and resource constrictions, this may not prove to be achievable and would therefore become a limiting factor on the findings and conclusions drawn.

## **Research methodology summary**

The preceding investigation into the theory of research and the methodological possibilities available has highlighted many areas for careful consideration.

Summaries have been made following each section in this chapter and these will be used as the basis for the investigation which follows.

In overall summary, there are several guiding points to note. It is important for the research itself to be relevant; relevant to the researcher and relevant to a fundamental understanding of knowledge. The research approach chosen should be the one that is most appropriate to the research problem. Therefore, it is important that the nature of the research issue is understood and defined before undertaking the research. This will then enable the research to further define areas such as what, why and how research will be studied.

It is also important that research is conducted in a true, faithful and honest manner and with a strong moral code. When involving research participants, this moral code should also be extended to include the way they are treated, in order to protect and respect them and their involvement. The integrity of the researcher must come into play at some point and it is important for them to present their findings as they perceive them in an open, non-selective way, even if the results contradict the initial hypothesis.

Qualitative data can be used to understand participants' experiences and perceptions and helps to ground the researcher in the real world at a particular moment in time.

Quantitative data can be used to present numerical data and explore and project relationships among variables and should take into account the population size and a justification for the representative sample size chosen.

From an epistemological perspective, it is the outcome, and therefore the researcher's interpretation and analysis of findings, that has the true value; making the process itself secondary to that outcome. This interpretation does result in limitations. A chosen study immediately places itself within the researcher's own perspective, which creates natural boundaries and limitations. Steps can be taken to reduce the degree of limitation – for instance using random research samples if possible from a credible section of the community that is being studied. Making attempts to base questions and answers on reality, not on ideal world scenarios will also help to minimise research study limitations. The researcher's prior experiences may be a limiting factor within research and it is important not to be over familiar with the subject as there is a danger of making assumptions.

The research should have a start and end point and provide the opportunity for peer consideration, review and/or assessment. This will allow for the opportunity to assess the benefits and minimise any risks. It will also maximise the opportunity for the research to have validity and provide a contribution to the field of knowledge.

Based on the above, the next chapter will put the theoretical knowledge into practice and move towards providing a body of work that adds value to the nature of learning and knowledge on the subject.

## Chapter 4 – Pilot research design, implementation and results

Following an analysis of research methods in the previous chapter, research theory will now be put into practice. A series of qualitative questions, directed towards further education college leaders will be asked via questionnaires or through semi-structured interviews, along with a related quantitative research study. This research will be focused around the impact these leaders believe their organisations contribute towards business effectiveness. The approach will be based upon the recommendations made in the research methodology chapter, which are briefly summarised in **Table 6**.

<b>Theory Topic</b>	<b>Research Approach</b>
<b>Knowledge</b>	Research approach will be based on the viewpoint that the information received, and conclusions drawn from this information, will be true and faithful to itself and part of an incremental progress towards the field of knowledge and understanding.
<b>Ethics</b>	The research will follow recommended ethical guidelines. The findings will be presented as the researcher interprets them, with no pre-conceived bias. Transcripts will evidence transparency and honesty.
<b>Qualitative and Quantitative, Triangulation, Mixed-Methods</b>	The most appropriate approach for this research work will be one that focuses on a qualitative approach. Consideration of the multi-method approach to enhance research analysis has been made, and this qualitative approach will be complemented by a quantitative survey of appropriate variables to enhance the qualitative findings, with semi-structured interviews used for further clarification.
<b>Philosophy</b>	This research will focus on a subjective interpretation of individuals' beliefs and perceived truths. The findings will be presented following a natural social constructivism of these multiple beliefs and viewpoints and will form a primarily interpretivistic approach.
<b>Limitations</b>	An awareness of the possibility of over-familiarisation with the research topic should help to guide the structure of the research questions in order to minimise or remove this potential limitation. A meaningful research sample is planned, in order to provide a true random sample of value. It is acknowledged that, due to limited resources, this may not prove to be achievable and may therefore become a limiting factor on the findings and conclusions drawn.
<b>Design</b>	The design will be guided by the research question and will help minimise any lack of objectivity by ensuring the questions posed and the scope for responses will allow for multiple perspectives from research participants.

**Table 6**  
**Overview of research approach, based upon analysis of research theory**

At the time of the research implementation (pilot research May-June 2012; full research May-June 2013), there were 341 colleges in England, of which 219 were classed as General Further Education (FE) colleges (AoC, 2012a, p.5). These 219 represented the population size relevant to this study of work. Due to resource restrictions (one individual conducting the research) and the unlikelihood of a full response being achievable, a 100% sample size was unrealistic. When considering the research implementation, the practical application of actually reaching a meaningful sample size, and an understanding that “response rates of 30%-50% are typical” (Lodico et al, 2010, p.221), an ambitious 25% (55 individuals) sample size to be approached was believed to be realistic. From this sample size, a response of between 17 and 28 individuals would be expected. This size would be manageable for one researcher, as well as providing enough coverage to allow for meaningful information to be received.

### **Pilot study**

Prior to conducting research with the full population of FE colleges, a pilot study was undertaken. This small scale study was conducted “in order to test the procedures and techniques to see that they work satisfactorily” (Anderson and Aresnault, 1998, pp.11-12). Pilot studies can be useful in that they can “determine whether the proposed study is feasible or not” (Chandra and Sharma, 2007, p.85). They can also alert researchers to elements “that support the objectives of the study and to those that detract from those objectives” (Seidman, 2006, p.39). Pilot studies can help researchers reflect and review their approach prior to full implementation, and provide an opportunity to refine or rethink elements as necessary.

In the week commencing Monday 28 May 2012, the pilot study was sent out to leaders (Principals and Directors of Business Services) from 12 FE colleges. This represented a 5.5% sample of the 219 FE colleges in England. 3 of the colleges were known to the researcher; the other nine were unknown and sourced via help from a National Skills



Academy<sup>12</sup>. The colleges involved in the pilot had a wide geographical coverage from North East and West to the South and South West of England. Inspections of the colleges had taken place between 2006 and 2010 and ranged from Good to Outstanding. 7 out of the 12 colleges had received the national accreditation of Training Quality Standard (TQS). This was an award to help employers find the best performing providers that ran from 2007-2011 (TES, 2011, Online). The award recognised and celebrated the “best organisations delivering training to employers” (TQS, 2011, Online). The overall sample size, location spread, quality of colleges and recognition of employer awards was felt to be balanced and representative of FE colleges in England.

The study commenced with an initial email, as shown in **Appendix A** (Maykels, 2014, p.4), inviting the individual to participate in the pilot study and development of the full research. The potential benefits to the sector (e.g. as a starting point for dialogue with government/sector bodies) were referred to. The participants were invited to complete an online quantitative research study as shown in **Appendix B** (ibid, pp.8-12). This could take 5-10 minutes to complete, slightly more if the participant wished to add additional comments or details. Individuals were also invited to participate in a longer qualitative study; lasting between 15 minutes and an hour, as shown in **Appendix D** (ibid, pp.33-35). This could be completed either online via responding to a series of set questions, or face to face with the researcher, as a semi-structured interview.

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<sup>12</sup> A National Skills Academy was seen as an ideal and impartial source for supporting this pilot, as they are national organisations connecting training providers with employers and employer skills demands. The Skills Funding Agency (2011b. online) adds further detail; “National Skills Academies are employer-led organisations with a leading role in developing the infrastructure needed to deliver specialist skills for key sectors and sub-sectors of the economy. National Skills Academies bring employers together with specialist training organisations to develop solutions which tackle the skills challenges facing their sector, and contribute to world-class competitiveness through increased skills levels and employer investment. They are focused on transforming the way a sector’s training and development needs are addressed”, Online 13 June 2012 at: <http://skillsfundingagency.bis.gov.uk/employers/growth-innovation-fund/national-skills-academies/>

Within the first week, 4 responses (33%) had been received for both the qualitative and quantitative surveys. No requests had been made for face to face interviews. A follow-up thank you and reminder was circulated w/c 14 June 2012, which included the survey end date of 25 June 2012. Two quantitative respondents replied following the reminder. Following the survey end date, 9 college leaders responded to the pilot request, from across the 12 FE colleges invited to participate. There were 9 responses to the online quantitative research study (a 75% response). 5 responded to the detailed qualitative questions online, (a 41% response). There were 0 requests for the qualitative research to be conducted via face to face interviews.

An analysis of responses follows. All responses are presented here anonymously.

### **Pilot study analysis**

An analysis of the responses will now be discussed and considered. The responses and feedback will be used to determine the feasibility and suitability of the full population research and whether amendments to the approach or topic need to be introduced.

The quantitative research covered 20 questions relating to the investigation into the research topic. Each question also allowed the respondent the opportunity to add some additional text to support their answer if required. The research, conducted as an online survey, should have taken no more than ten minutes to complete. No questions or answers were compulsory. The pilot survey itself is shown as **Appendix B** (Maykels, 2014, pp.8-12) and a complete record of responses is presented as **Appendix C** (ibid, pp.13-32). **Table 7** presents a summarised overview of the questions asked.

Question	Response Options	
1 Colleges of Further Education in England contribute towards business competitiveness through the business training and development they provide.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
2 Colleges of Further Education in England are the most effective organisations to deliver skills and training to businesses.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
3 Our College measures the impact its training has upon business competitiveness.	100% of time 50-1% of time	99-51% of time 0% of time
4 Businesses understand the benefits our college can make to their competitiveness.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
5 The training and development our college provides to businesses is solely based on their business need.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
6 Businesses choose training and development that is less appropriate to their needs if it is free.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
7 Our College responds rapidly to the changing needs of businesses.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
8 Colleges of Further Education in England should have a key role in determining skills policies for businesses.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
9 Skills policies for businesses are determined through effective dialogue with colleges of Further Education in England.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
10 Our College invests resources in research and development for businesses training.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
11 Our College communicates effectively with businesses.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
12 The government values the contribution Further Education colleges make towards business competitiveness.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
13 Our college actively seeks feedback from our businesses regarding the training and skills we provide.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
14 The image of our college is appropriate for communicating with businesses.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
15 A national measure of the impact Further Education makes towards business effectiveness would be valuable.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
16 Nationally recognised qualifications are the most effective way of making businesses more competitive.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
17 Our college has a close relationship with the key bodies that represent the skills needs of our employers.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
18 We know what our businesses think about the training and support service our college provides.	Every business More than half our businesses Less than half our businesses None of our businesses	
19 Our college is the first choice for businesses that require training and development.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
20 The training and development our college provides to businesses increases their competitiveness.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree

**Table 7**  
**Summary overview of quantitative research questions**

Graphical representations of each individual response are presented at **Appendix C**. Indications of whether any respondent skipped the question or included an additional response are included with these graphs, along with the responses as they were presented. No text has been altered and any grammatical errors have been retained. All responses were collated anonymously. Seven respondents left comments; two did not.

Interestingly, response times varied considerably, not just from the estimated ten minutes, but between the respondents themselves (see **Table 8**).

Respondent	Time	Median	Number of comments
7	3 minutes 2 seconds		0
9	4 minutes 13 seconds		1
2	6 minutes 40 seconds		4
1	8 minutes 40 seconds		0
6	11 minutes 12 seconds	<b>11 minutes 12 seconds</b>	8
8	13 minutes 2 seconds		5
3	16 minutes 26 seconds		17
5	19 minutes 57 seconds		13
4	59 minutes 54 seconds		5
<b>Mean</b>	<b>15 minutes 54 seconds</b>		<b>5.9</b>

**Table 8**  
**Overview of response times**

The times have been collated from the start and finish point of the survey, so it is quite possible that the respondent who took 59 minutes and 54 seconds did not spend all that time on the survey; there may have been a delay in submitting it. On that basis, the median of 11 minutes 12 seconds, particularly considering the fact that the respondent submitted eight comments, provides a more reliable indicator of the approximate time spent on the study.

The qualitative research covered 15 questions relating to the investigation into the research topic. These are indicated below in **Table 9** and shown as **Appendix D**.

There was an opportunity for respondents to complete an online response to these or to request it as a one to one interview. The research, conducted as an online survey, should take approximately 45 minutes to complete; as an interview, approximately one hour. No questions or answers were compulsory. A complete record of responses is presented at **Appendix E**.

Question
1. Who is responsible for developing the competitiveness of businesses in England?
2. What responsibility should further education colleges have for ensuring their offer and delivery contributes to economic effectiveness?
3. How do you measure the contribution you make to the effectiveness of the businesses you support?
4. Have you examples of where the intervention or support of Further Education has directly made a positive impact upon business competitiveness?
5. Why should colleges of Further Education provide skills and training support to local businesses?
6. Would businesses themselves or independent training specialists be able to provide a more effective service?
7. How effective are colleges of Further Education in responding rapidly to the changing needs of the businesses they support?
8. How do qualifications make a difference to business competitiveness?
9. Why should colleges of Further Education provide skills and training support to local businesses?
10. How do you invest resources in research and development?
11. What do you believe businesses think about the value Further Education colleges provide?
12. What do you believe the government think about the value Further Education colleges provide?
13. How effective is the communication between businesses, funding bodies, policy makers and further education colleges?
14. How do you communicate with businesses in order to find out what they think about the training and services your college provides?
15. Do you believe that skills policies for the interaction between Further Education Colleges and businesses in England are formed effectively?

**Table 9**  
**Summary overview of qualitative research questions**

## Research summary

This pilot research has been conducted in order to allow for a period of consideration prior to the full study and, if necessary, make changes, or introduce additional questions as appropriate.

Questions have been grouped into sub-themes and their relative weightings overlaid onto the theoretical model (**Model B**). An analysis of responses, along with recommendations is presented for each sub theme. Strengths and weaknesses of the pilot research are then summarised and recommended adjustments to the weighting and focus of the questions are made.

This research focuses on the impact FE college leaders in England believe their organisations contribute towards business competitiveness. In order to provide a framework for considering the responses; what, if any, information the responses are providing; and to understand how the responses fit together and align with the focus of this research, the questions have been grouped into themes. This will allow for a consideration of the information provided within the responses and help uncover meaning within the data responses provided. From a qualitative perspective, this will follow the principles of *coding* (Neuman, 2000, pp.420-424); the creation of themes or concepts through an organisation of raw data into conceptual categories.

**Table 10** identifies the sub-themes within the questions that were presented to the respondents. These sub-themes of the overall research focus were categorised as: *Business Competitiveness; Effectiveness; Skills Offer; Development; Communication; Funding; Overall* (Policy-focussed).

The considerable additional information provided within the research (**Appendix C**) provides an ideal opportunity to code these responses similarly. **Table 10** shows how

the information from **Appendix C** can be aligned with that of **Appendix E** in order to provide a rich and comprehensive pool of data for analysis. The volume of data provided within **Appendix C** is surprising; as it was anticipated most respondents would wish to move quickly through this questionnaire and, if they did have information to share, would wish to provide this at the more detailed stage. As illustrated within this chapter, this proved not to be the case, and significant feedback was obtained from both stages.

Coded Sub-Themes	Qualitative Question Numbers	Assigned Quantitative Question Numbers
Business Competitiveness	1, 2	1, 3, <b>4, 6, 15, 16, 20</b>
Effectiveness	3, 4	2, <b>13, 15, 18, 19, 20</b>
Skills Offer	5, 6, 7, 8	5, <b>6, 7, 8, 16, 17</b>
Development	9	<b>7, 10</b>
Communication	10, 11, 12, 13	<b>4, 9, 11, 13, 14, 17, 18, 19, 20</b>
Funding	14	<b>6</b>
Overall Policy	15	<b>8, 9, 12, 15</b>

**Table 10**  
**Coded sub-themes for analysis of qualitative and quantitative data**

As can be seen from **Table 10**, whereas the qualitative questions were presented in a thematic order, the quantitative questions were in a more random order. This is for a couple of reasons; partly to allow for the consideration that there may be some overlap in the interpretation (where a question could cover more than one sub-theme, the number has been presented in bold italics) and partly to allow for consideration of the data when the respondent has not been guided through themes, in order to see if any patterns or discrepancies occur. Whether this freedom for the respondent provides clarity or difficulty for research interpretation is an area that will be considered within this section and reviewed accordingly before the main research stage.





**Model B** shows the original model proposed with the balance of the questions overlaid in order to show how the theoretical proposal and the implementation of research relate to one another. The perceived importance by the researcher of *Communication*, *Business Competitiveness*, *Effectiveness* and *Skills Offer* within the model is reflected within the number of questions assigned to the research. This model will also be reflected upon at the summary stage of the pilot research.

For the research questionnaire, each question has a graph showing the responses received and these are presented within **Appendix C**. Responses were agreed to be anonymous prior to conducting this research and have been reported within this document as such.

### Business competitiveness – summary of pilot research

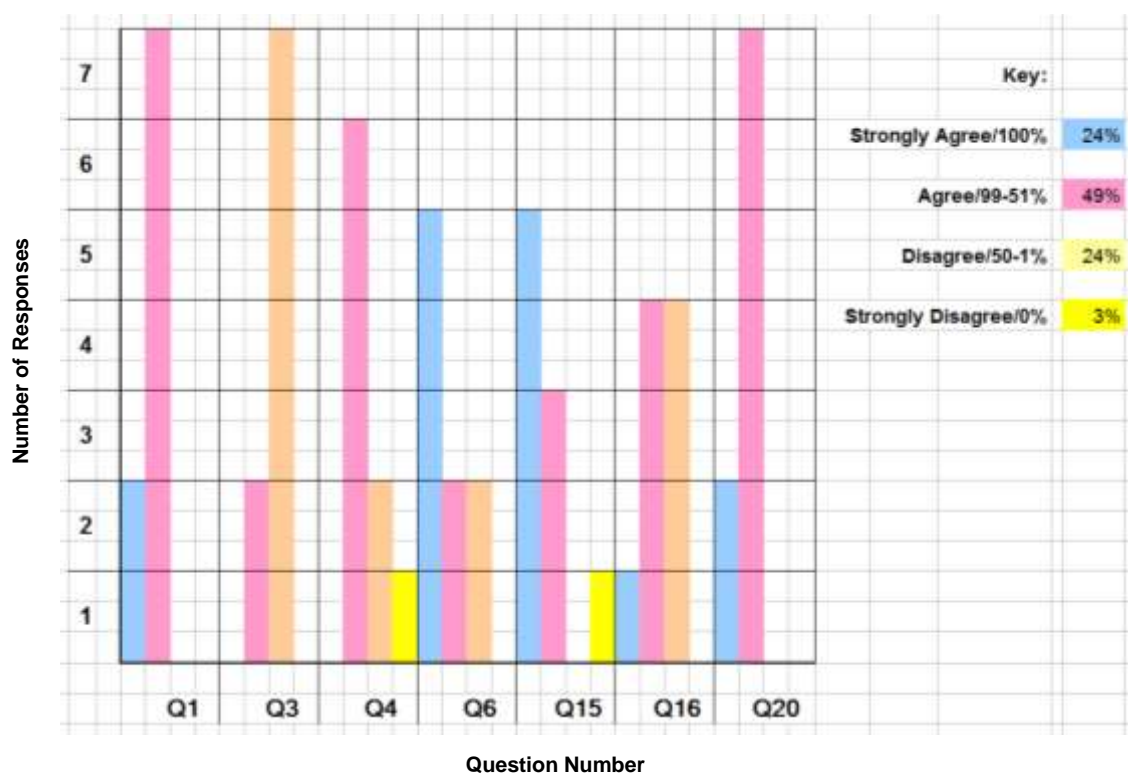


Table 11

Pilot stage - Quantitative comparison of business competitiveness responses

**Table 11** brings together the relative weightings of responses. All weightings had four scales to choose from. All questions apart from 3 and 18 ranged from *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree*. Overall, it is interesting to note that the percentage of *Strongly Agree* and *Disagree* responses is the same at 24%.

The response to the first question, suggesting that *Colleges of Further Education in England contribute towards business competitiveness through the business training and development they provide* was overwhelmingly positive. Two respondents strongly agreed and the other seven agreed with the statement. This level of positive response was also reflected in the question; *The training and development our college provides to businesses increases their competitiveness*, although with differing respondents.

One respondent strongly agreed with the initial question, noting that for businesses, colleges “can give an independent view and help with consistency.” As the questioning unfolded though, it was interesting to see that some respondents struggled to be able to support this view. On asking whether colleges measured the impact they had upon business competitiveness, one individual replied that there was no consistent approach; they measured “quality, but not always impact.” When discussing whether a national measure of the impact FE makes towards business competitiveness would be valuable, responses were mixed. One respondent strongly disagreed with the idea; dismissing the suggestion by saying that “it would not justify the cost for development.”

Competitiveness was developed further in the qualitative research when the question regarding *who is responsible for developing the competitiveness of businesses in England* was asked. All respondents replied. No-one included FE colleges within their replies. One individual suggested it was “BIS<sup>13</sup> officially, but businesses themselves

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<sup>13</sup> The government department for Business, Innovation and Skills

should take responsibility as well.” Another respondent also referred to government departments, saying that BIS was responsible in partnership with UKCES<sup>14</sup> and the Skills Funding Agency. Other respondents acknowledged government agencies and other forces, but concluded that it was either “the business itself” with government agency support and that “ultimately it falls to private enterprise and its stakeholders to achieve competitiveness (*sic*).”

Respondents believed that FE contributes towards business competitiveness. However, this belief does appear to be at odds with the acknowledgement that colleges are weak in measuring the impact the training has upon such competitiveness and that such a benchmark does not seem to be required. FE colleges were also not at the forefront of FE leaders’ minds when it came to having responsibility for the development of business competitiveness. The closest the FE sector came to being partially included was in one respondent’s use of the term *stakeholders*.

A follow-up question, seeking to clarify what responsibility FE colleges should have *for ensuring their offer and delivery contributes to economic effectiveness* was asked. This direct correlation between FE and economic effectiveness generated more connected responses.

One respondent believed FE should have “great responsibility. I believe this is a crucial role that FE can provide – but sadly often fails to do so.” Others agreed that the responsibility was “significant” and that “the training offer should bring economic benefits to all beneficiaries” with the training and educational inputs being able to “benefit the wider community and society as a whole including industry.”

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<sup>14</sup> The UK Commission for Employment and Skills

Another respondent also believed that FE's responsibility should be "significant". They continued however by adding that;

"I do not believe that the *raison d'être* (*sic*) of FE should be to deliver (*sic*) a blunt skills agenda for work and economic effectiveness. This should be at the heart of what FE does, however there is also a need to provide broader opportunities (*sic*) for local communities to engage in learning which enriches and is more abstract than (*sic*) simply providing competence based qualifications which are directly related to work"

One respondent seemingly divorced FE colleges of responsibility for determining the specific needs of their employers. They suggested simply that "FE Colleges should be responsible for delivering the skills identified by Business & Government."

A reference to skills raised the question of whether nationally recognised qualifications were the most effective way of making businesses more competitive. This question divided respondents; receiving an equal number of *agree* and *disagree* responses, with only one individual strongly agreeing. One respondent disagreed, saying that "each employer has a specific need for their business" and that the skills training provided should be specific to that need, not just recognised qualifications; an opinion at odds with the previous respondent. Another individual agreed, "assuming it's relevant, good quality delivery." A different respondent also agreed that the most effective way of making businesses more competitive is through delivery of nationally recognised qualifications (although not always); adding that "they help give national currency to the individual."

Those who disagreed saw business competitiveness being supported more strongly through other forms of skills and related support. It was suggested that qualifications were "just one way of supporting business growth. Consultancy, bespoke training and

one to one support can be just as, if not more, effective.” This was echoed by a different respondent, who agreed that qualifications “play a part” in helping businesses to be competitive “but are not the most effective way. Other training and support should be in the mix.” This is an area that will be further investigated later in this section as part of the *Skills Offer* coded sub-theme.

The question of whether respondents believed that businesses understood the benefits their college could make to their competitiveness was asked. Although the majority (six respondents) agreed with the question, two disagreed and one individual strongly disagreed. The responses received were unexpected, touching upon a theme that may need to be explored in more depth at the further research stage. Although there were the expected similarities between the *disagree* response of “Some do, many do not” and the *agree* response of “Some businesses”, it was the responses that referenced a lack of internal college consistency that proved to be more interesting.

One respondent agreed with the statement, suggesting that where a business “has dealt with the Business Unit personnel yes...less so if dealing with mainstream provision.” This apparent inconsistency of a college approach in dealing with businesses and responding effectively to their need was also echoed by another; “for those which work with us they find that they (*sic*) is a benefit, however I also disagree with this statement as some business (*sic*) do not understand this... and some staff (college) do not realise it either.” This inconsistency was also echoed in a reply focussing on whether training and development provided by their college to businesses increases their competitiveness; “where it is measured by the Business Unit, there are definite success stories to support this. Less so with mainstream provision.”

Both respondents, although offering different perspectives, seemed to refer to the fact that their colleges did not act in a unified way in responding to an employer and

businesses' needs, but had assigned responsibility for dealing with businesses to a 'business unit' that is seemingly separated from the college as a whole. This was an interesting point raised and one that had not been considered prior to the research being undertaken. If a college did not have an organisational-wide approach, knowledge and consistency to working with external businesses, this could possibly account for a lack of understanding of competitiveness benefits for businesses, as well as reflect poorly on the FE college sector as a whole.

Although everyone provided a response to **Question 6**; *Businesses choose training and development that is less appropriate to their needs if it is free*, no respondent provided any additional comments. It is recommended that the question is looked at to see if it can be asked slightly differently, perhaps to include a connection between business competitiveness and free courses, in order to generate additional valuable feedback if possible. The sub-theme regarding funding will pick up the issue later on in this section and make recommendations for a possible amendment to this question.

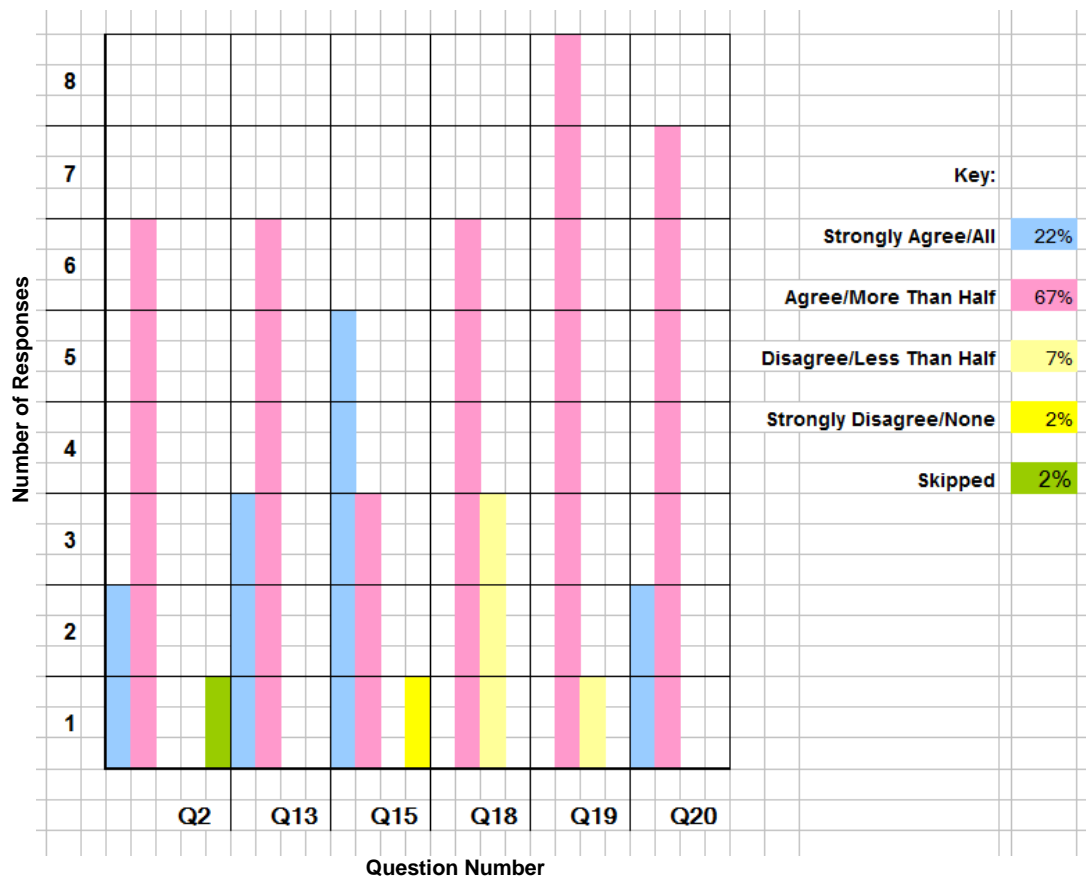
### **Business competitiveness – summary and recommendations**

Overall, this sub-theme generated some valuable responses and information. A few refinements are also recommended below.

- A topic was raised within the feedback by two respondents that is worth pursuing at the next stage; the possibility that colleges do not have an organisation-wide approach to responding to business needs, but see it as a function of a 'business unit'. It is recommended that an adjustment is made to the questions following the pilot stage to see whether this isolation of the business unit from the college as a whole is perceived to be a common issue, and whether this is also a potential barrier to the impact colleges of further education could have towards business competitiveness.

- An additional topic also worth pursuing is that of whether FE college leaders believe that colleges have a responsibility for developing the effectiveness of businesses. As no respondent included colleges in their responses at the pilot stage, a re-phrasing, or follow-up question around this area is recommended.
- A consideration of the responses to **Question 6** (*businesses choose training and development that is less appropriate to their needs if it is free*) will be made within the *funding* sub theme, later on in this chapter.

#### Effectiveness – summary of pilot research



**Table 12**  
**Pilot Stage - Quantitative comparison of effectiveness responses**

**Table 12** brings together the relative weightings of responses. All questions had four scales to choose from. *Question 18* requested a choice between *All, More Than Half, Less Than Half, None*; all the others ranged from *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree*. Overall, there was a significant (67%) belief from respondents that colleges were effective at supporting business competitiveness.

Are colleges of further education *the most effective organisations to deliver skills and training to businesses*? One respondent strongly agreed, noting that “they are very experienced in skills delivery” and that “it is important that trust is developed so that the training can be applied to the organisational need.” Other respondents provided more balanced comments. One replied that there “are examples of good practice in both” colleges and private providers. This was echoed by another who agreed with the question, but pointed out that there is a place for specialist training providers who deliver high quality work based training and that it can be mutually beneficial for colleges to work in partnership with such providers. It was suggested that colleges should not exist in isolation. One respondent noted that “there are many specialist skills training organisations that provide excellent service to employers which balances this aspect.” This was added to by a different respondent who suggested that colleges “should also be working with other providers of business training to ensure currency of knowledge”, reinforcing the fact that there should be shared expertise for there to be a true benefit to businesses.

A further question was asked as to how colleges measure the contribution they make towards business effectiveness. One respondent said that every activity “whether training, consultancy or bespoke is evaluated by the individuals involved. Any good or poor practise is then picked up and acted upon.” Measurement of this effectiveness varied but did seem to be a positive action made by respondents. One individual’s college collected “impact data and is now improving this process to be wider in scope”,



often collecting success in terms of money saved. A different respondent measured effectiveness through direct employer feedback and working in partnership with sector skills councils, while another collected data via a customer relationship management system and through their key account managers.

There were also examples provided to evidence the impact FE had positively made to businesses. Examples of this impact ranged from a number of significant benefits “in terms of staff motivation, absenteeism, production output and cost reduction”, to “succession planning for companies with ageing workforce, leadership and management programmes and programmes aimed at skills and retention of staff”, to business “sales increased and systems improved.” The variety of methods used appeared to work well for the individual colleges, and suggested that perhaps a bespoke and localised approach to measuring effectiveness was the correct method; after all, local business need and support may often require bespoke skills and training delivery. One individual provided an interesting thought, echoing replies from the previous section regarding a lack of an organisation-wide approach to liaison with businesses. The respondent noted that they were very strong “in gaining feedback on WBL<sup>15</sup> and full cost activity, more variable with mainstream. Major issue is the collating of the information because this is done in such a variety of ways, so no consistency.”

Inconsistency in measuring or obtaining impact evidence did seem to be an issue for respondents. Perhaps a national measure of effectiveness would therefore be useful to smooth out some of this inconsistent approach? A question (*a national measure of the impact Further Education makes towards business effectiveness would be valuable*) was asked, directly focussing on that suggestion. There were mixed opinions, mostly in agreement, suggesting that this is may be an idea for consideration.

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<sup>15</sup> Work-based Learning

It may prove useful to focus the question a bit more, in order to generate some thought regarding the possible shape this national measure could take. This idea was tempered with caution from some respondents due to the fact that previous attempts to do this have had poor, finance-driven focuses and that the development costs for such a proposal may be unjustifiable.

The feedback these respondents' colleges believed they received from their measurement of effectiveness resulted in a strong opinion (8 out of 9 agreed) that their college was *the first choice for businesses that require training and development*. However, even from those who agreed, this was with the caveat, and perhaps some realism, that it may be "only for the ones we work with" and that it was only the case for "some not all." One respondent disagreed that colleges were necessarily the first choice for businesses, suggesting that "in the current climate, businesses will go for value for money. Where we offer that, they will come to us." This opinion interestingly refers to value rather than cost, and supports the theoretical findings discussed in **Chapter 2** that FE needs to offer attractive and responsive products that best meet employers' needs in order for the college-business partnership to flourish.

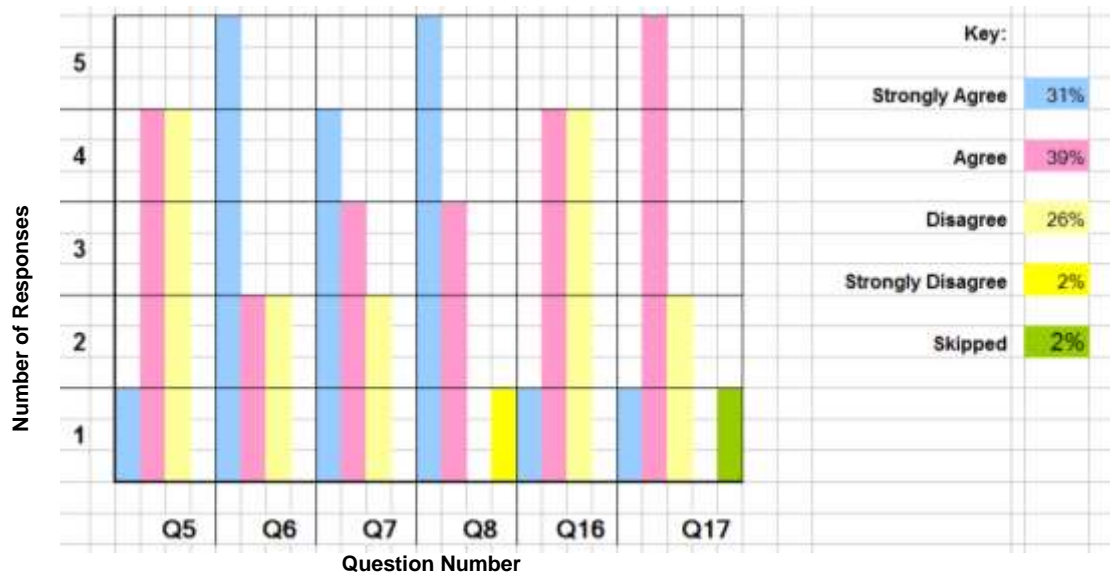
### **Effectiveness – summary and recommendations**

These questions received a wide range of responses that helped build an understanding of how effective FE college leaders perceived their relationships with businesses to be. A couple of recommendations for adjustments are presented below.

- No comments were received for the question *we know what our businesses think about the training and support service our college provides*. As this question is similar to the question regarding *actively seeking feedback* in its intent, which did receive comments, it is recommended that the former question is removed for the further stage of this research.

- A refinement or addition to the question regarding a national measure of effectiveness is recommended. This should aim to generate some responses relating to the possible shape or approach this could take, rather than simply agreement or disagreement.

### Skills offer – summary of pilot research



**Table 13**

### Pilot Stage - Quantitative comparison of skills offer responses

**Table 13** brings together the relative weightings of responses to the findings regarding *skills offer*. All weightings had four scales to choose from. One respondent skipped a question. Overall, there was a relatively mixed spread of responses, with *agree* (at 39%) being the greatest.

Skills delivery lies at the heart of FE colleges and this is reflected in the wide spread of questions asked both as part of the qualitative and quantitative pilot research. This is also visually represented at the heart of **Model B**, illustrated earlier in this section.

The question *why should colleges of further education provide skills and training support to local businesses* was put to FE leaders in order to understand their position on this topic. One respondent believed that “FE should be an integral part of a local community, which includes supporting businesses to grow via skills and training.” This societal aspect of a college was echoed by another who noted that a “prosperous business community generates a prosperous society, Colleges exist to serve all parts of society.” This idea was developed further by another respondent who suggested that local businesses “bring economic prosperity to an area along with employment - if business prospers - communities prosper.”

These responses from leaders of FE colleges highlighted a strong underlying belief that FE colleges exist to serve their communities and that the business community is a key part of this. Producing relevant skills and training to support this aspect of the community is seen as vital. This viewpoint was supported by one respondent who saw the role of an FE college as one of investing in skills and the future. Colleges, the respondent suggested, “are able to provide not just the skills needed by the current market but also the skills required in the future by working with younger people.”

With this strong viewpoint in mind, it would be natural to assume therefore that the relationship between FE colleges and businesses is so close that the skills, training and development the colleges provide to businesses is solely based on their business need. When asked that question however, respondents became split on their opinions, with equal numbers disagreeing as agreeing, and only one individual strongly agreeing. In fact, the comments received were negative ones.

“I feel we often sell ‘off the shelf’ products rather than analysing the needs of the business” reflected one respondent. They continued by voicing concerns that “staffing resources and a lack of understanding of alternative business solutions often result in employers being provided with standard qualifications.” A negative impression was offered by another individual who believed that times had changed and that “changes to funding over the past 15 years as (*sic*) led to too much ‘free’ and sometimes inappropriate training being delivered.” Funding directing the nature of delivery was echoed by others too.

It was suggested that training delivered to meet business need often became “shoe horned into a funded qualification to draw down funding.” Another respondent added that qualifications “do not in themselves make a difference to business competitiveness, skills and education do.” This apparent conflict between funding received and business skills needed was picked up by another who suggested that “often a compromise exists between reconciling various caveats related to training, e.g. qualification (*sic*) aims, funding requirements, accreditation and so on, and the specific needs of a business.”

Respondents had previously commented that nationally recognised qualifications (which in the vast majority of cases are funded via government agencies) are just one way, and not always the most effective way, of making businesses more competitive. If this opinion was mirrored at the further research stage, it would appear that FE college leaders would need to reconsider their delivery approach and product range if their skills offer was truly to be designed to support business competitiveness. Possible solutions could include directly generating more income for delivery via the businesses themselves; influencing the key bodies that determine the national skills policies; or helping to amend curriculum frameworks so that they are more flexible to meet business need.

With the skills needs of businesses varying and changing rapidly, did FE college leaders believe their organisations were able to respond rapidly to meet these needs? Responses were mixed, and as was seen in the earlier *Business competitiveness* section, a lack of a college-wide approach was raised again. One argued that where there was an FE college business unit, there was an ability to respond effectively; where there was not, the college was probably less effective. Another was more upbeat; suggesting that in terms of meeting changing skills needs, colleges were responding “better all the time, as with most larger organisations though there can be a lag effect.”

This delay was picked up by another respondent in a response that also touched on the theme of a varying college approach to working with businesses. “Curriculum development is slow and is restricted by existing staff being prioritised. Colleges are not able to change their workforce as easily as private changing providers who can respond quicker to business needs.”

The view of private training providers being more responsive than FE colleges was not shared by all. One respondent commented that colleges “are increasingly responsive in this area and now in my view match the service offered to business by the private sector.” When considering the effectiveness of FE colleges as opposed to independent providers, both, the respondent noted, “have an important role to play in ensuring effective choice and making sure the skills system is flexible.”

### **Skills offer – summary and recommendations**

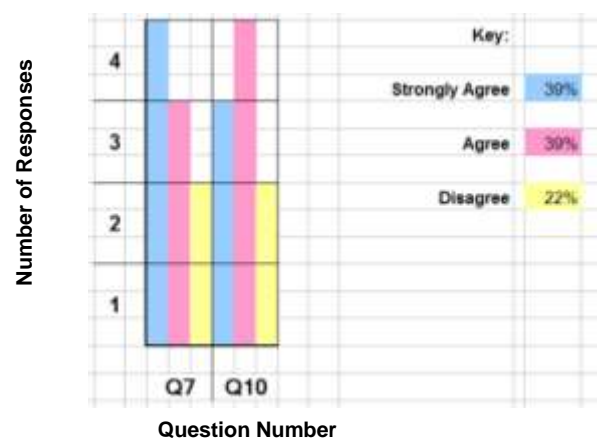
These responses raised a couple of questions and recommendations:

- *Should FE colleges deliver the best skills and training to meet employers’ business needs rather than that which their funding steers them to deliver? This*

was a question that had not been considered at the pilot stage, but one that, in light of these responses, would be worth pursuing. It raises potential issues, possibly relating to a reliance on funding in order to support businesses within FE, or possibly of a skills gap within FE staff, for example in sales or business communication, in order to better support employers.

- Is there a reason that funding provided for business training (the majority of which comes via governmental agencies) is not able to deliver the most appropriate or effective skills to respond to business need?* This question works on the assumption that the opinions previously received from respondents are indeed the case and would need carefully exploring. As the topic has been raised within the pilot research, it is recommended that this is pursued at the next research stage. It will be interesting to uncover whether there appears to be barrier or mismatch in funding to meet business skills and training needs, or whether this is more a belief or excuse within the sector for not self-generating income.

**Development – summary of pilot research**



**Table 14**  
**Pilot stage - Quantitative comparison of development responses**

**Table 14** highlights the fact that this was one of the lightest areas for investigation, a fact that will be reflected upon during the conclusions. **Table 14** brings together the relative weightings of responses to the findings regarding *development*. All weightings had four scales to choose from, although no respondent chose *strongly disagree*.

The statement seven out of nine respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with was that their college *invests resources in research and development for business training*. One individual noted however that for their organisation “this is limited.” Another suggested that the focus on research and development may well be ad hoc and uncoordinated rather than a priority college function, due to it being seen “as part of the sales function rather than a dedicated role.” This differed in another’s case, where the business unit was “still seen as key to college development.”

When asked how their college invested its resources in research and development, the sales or business teams were seen as key. One respondent revealed that they “have a dedicated sales team that spend all their time with employers discussing their needs” and that this team were responsible for sourcing the “training and qualifications often at short notice. Employers often report that speed is the major issue and have high expectations in this area.” One individual reported that resources were invested via the “sales team and business development teams”; a fact that was echoed by another who suggested it was “the sales force and Key Account managers who monitor demand and trend.” Interestingly for an FE college leader, one respondent replied that this area was unfortunately “outside my remit”; a reply quite curious in that it suggested that research and development could be seen to be divorced from leadership.

### **Development – summary and recommendations**

The weighting provided to the topic regarding investment in research and development for business training does reflect the relative emphasis presented on **Model B** and

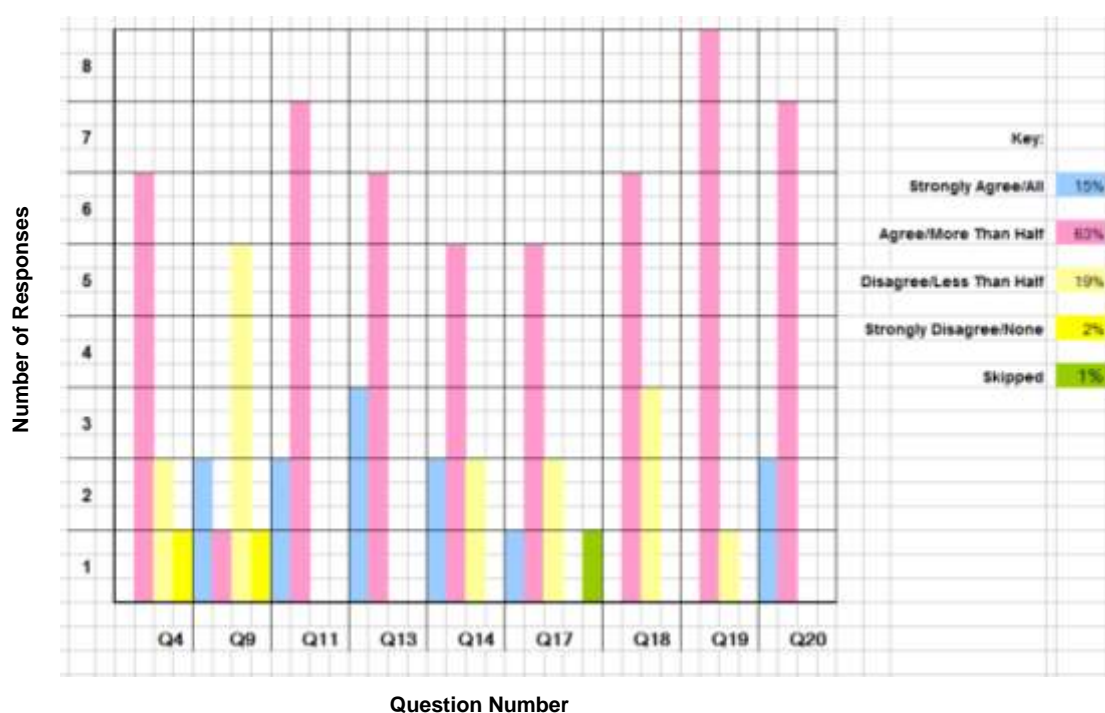


considered within the literature review. Indeed, apart from a brief discussion regarding product life cycles, the majority of investigation into development focussed on investment in employee training and development.

An additional question in light of one respondent's statement regarding leadership and responsibility for investment in research and development being separate (i.e. the possibility for reflection and potential improvement and change) is recommended:

- The question should focus on resource investment and the individual leader's perception of their role in the development of products for business training and investigate whether there is a leadership issue to consider as a potential barrier to supporting business competitiveness or whether too much has been read into a single comment.

### Communication – summary of pilot research



**Table 15**  
**Pilot stage - Quantitative comparison of communication responses**

Clear and effective communication is vital for almost every aspect, function and task within a business. In order to influence and develop human capital, to be able to lead employees, or to develop organisational systems, strong communication is vital. This level of importance regarding communication has been reflected within the pilot research questions. Almost half of the questions had a strong focus on aspects of communication. **Table 15** highlights this emphasis and brings together the responses. All questions had four scales to choose from. *Question 18* requested a choice between *All to None*; all the others ranged from *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree*. One respondent skipped *question 17*. Although there are variances within the responses, as can be seen in the table, there is an overall positive agreement from college leaders regarding communication issues relating to business competitiveness.

College leaders were asked: *How do you communicate with businesses in order to find out what they think about the training and services your college provides?* A range of methods for communication was discussed. Where there had been substantial training activity, one college used business advisers to “contact companies directly with a dedicated questionnaire.” Additionally, following training, every individual completed an evaluation form and apprentices were sent an interim and end of training questionnaire. Unfortunately, the respondent noted, “there is no consistency with any of these.” Questionnaires were also sent to all employees at another respondent’s college, as well as using key account managers to visit their customer base. Additionally, the college hosted network meetings to gather employers’ comments and needs. One individual conducted “an annual independent telephone survey examining the strengths and weaknesses of our service.”

Interestingly, a third of respondents believed that they have knowledge from less than half their businesses regarding employers’ thoughts about the training and support service their college provides, whilst at the same time all agreeing, or strongly

agreeing, that they communicate effectively with businesses. This did seem to raise a discrepancy in perception, particularly as everyone also agreed or strongly agreed that they actively sought feedback from their businesses regarding the training and skills they provide.

One respondent reflected again upon a lack of in-college consistency, suggesting they were very strong in gaining feedback on work based learning and full cost activity, but “more variable within mainstream.” Another individual did point out that when it came to communicating effectively with businesses, this was “only with the ones that are engaged.” This may well reflect the position with the previous respondents’ replies; that they have systems for communicating effectively with existing businesses, but not with others, and provide a possible solution to the discrepancy within the answers. There could also be the possibility that, as noted in the earlier chapter on *research methodology*, some people may be answering questions where what they say they do and what they actually do are different (Bryman and Bell, 2007, p.282). It is recommended that questions 11, 13 and 18 in the quantitative analysis are reviewed to try and eliminate this discrepancy and provide an honest opinion regarding effectiveness of business communication.

College leaders overwhelmingly agreed that they believed their colleges were *the first choice for businesses that require training and development*. Whether this was based on communicated fact rather than hope was difficult to evidence from the questioning and is an area that should be tightened up at the full research stage. The reason for this is that, despite 8 out of 9 respondents agreeing, not all of the comments positively reflected this assertion. One individual who agreed then qualified it by suggesting that it was the case for many of their employer partners but that there were multinationals or other employers who “simply prefer to use multiple providers.” Another agreed with the position and then contradicted it by adding “but only for the ones we work with...

evidence suggests college (*sic*) are not.” This was echoed by a further respondent’s reply of “some not all.”

Perhaps this is down to image? It is possible that indirect communication, i.e. the projected image of the college to businesses, had an influence on employers’ perception. Whereas one individual strongly agreed that their college’s image was appropriate for communicating with businesses within their locality and a 30 mile radius, another had a different perspective. The image of further education to businesses was, they suggested, “a perennial problem for the sector. For many employers college activity is simply either misunderstood or very out of date.” Despite strongly agreeing that their college projected the appropriate image to businesses, there was only one individual who disagreed that their college was the first choice for businesses. They approached the position from an economic business perspective by noting that in the current climate “businesses will go for value for money. Where we offer that, they will come to us.”

It may be that this positive belief of colleges being the first choice for businesses, despite the comments, came from an ongoing dialogue and communications between college leaders and their employers regarding the value businesses had of the services FE provided? One positive respondent believed that this was down to employers’ experience, reflecting that in their college “some businesses cannot sing our praises highly enough in terms of value, quality etc.” Another believed businesses had a mixed reaction to understanding the value of FE colleges, but that as colleges now operated more like businesses, the response and service provided by colleges “now matches that offered by the private sector.” One individual provided additional information, again showing how respondents are able to temper their agreement regarding value and first choice with caution. “For some”, the respondent noted, colleges were “highly

valued resource and partner organisations, for others Colleges are low down on the list of priorities (*sic*).”

An area where there was disagreement regarding effectiveness of communication was one of dialogue between further education colleges, government, businesses and other bodies that represent the skills needs of employers. One respondent felt that colleges were not represented effectively in Parliament with the result that “communication about the value added by FE often isn’t clear.” The respondent also noted that, whilst large businesses were starting to have effective dialogue; smaller businesses “often don’t have the resources to engage in the skills debate.” Respondents felt that communication was poor. One believed only a small proportion of businesses were represented at policy level and that communication was poor because the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) and policy makers were “too focussed on the ‘Levels’ and FE has to bend to meet all these needs”, suggesting an imposition of policy upon FE rather than a participation. Another respondent, although believing effective dialogue did take place, via the Association of Colleges<sup>16</sup> on behalf of the sector, also felt that communication was poor because of the funding-driven rather than needs-driven nature of policy. Employers, the respondent suggested, “do not need to understand funding they just want their workforce to have the skills required to do a job of work.”

Whether that is the case or not, one respondent did not feel the government thought “as much as it should do” about the value FE colleges provide. When it came to effective dialogue for determining FE skills policies, this individual was not sure “what dialogue there currently is”, suggesting policies were more driven by sector skills

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<sup>16</sup> The Association of Colleges was established in 1996 by colleges themselves as a voice for further education and higher education delivered in colleges at national and regional level. The AoC aims to be the authoritative voice of colleges and exists to represent and promote their interests. Further information can be found online at: <http://www.aoc.co.uk/>

council (SSC) or skills funding agency requirements. As was discovered earlier, college leaders believed that SSCs were largely disconnected from FE, or at best the relationships were very, very variable, suggesting a real communications disconnection between policy, agencies and FE needs to be addressed. Policy issues will be looked at again later in this chapter.

### Communication – summary and recommendations

This section seemed to generate more ambiguity between respondents' beliefs and their comments, suggesting there could be a possible area of limitation within the questioning whereby individuals are conflicted in their replies. Alternatively, there exists the possibility that ideal rather than true world answers were being presented.

Recommended courses of action:

- Tighten up questioning around the area of first choice (question 19)
- To review quantitative questions 11, 13 and 18 to receive more clarity around the area of effective business communication.

### Funding – summary of pilot research

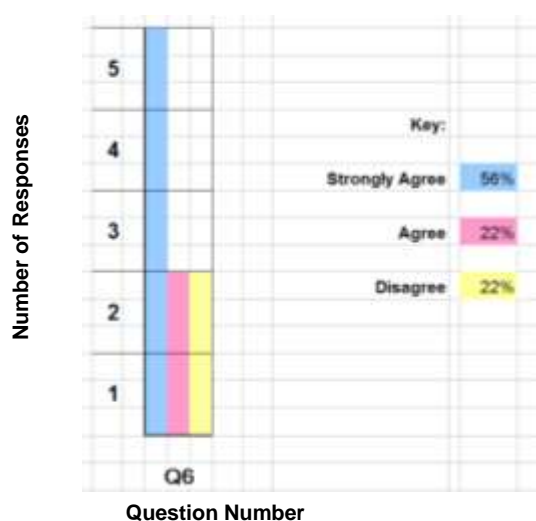


Table 16

Pilot stage - Quantitative comparison of funding responses

**Model B** proposed that *funding* was a comparatively smaller area for impact investigation than other sub themes, such as *communication* or *skills offer*. There was an assumption that funding investment may be made by an individual, employee, employer, government (or agency), or a combination of any, with the common theme being that *someone* invests in skills and training. In addition, other questions indirectly led onto responses that included funding within their replies, such as within *skills offer* and other areas that have been discussed earlier in this chapter. As such, only one quantitative question was put to respondents; the suggestion of whether businesses *choose training and development that is less appropriate to their needs if it is free*. The intent of this question was to see whether FE leaders believed their businesses perceived skills and training as a cost rather than an investment.

Seven out of the nine respondents agreed or strongly agreed that businesses choose less appropriate training if it is free (**Table 16**). This was interesting in itself, as it suggests a possible acknowledgement on the part of FE leaders of a value perception held by employers of the business value of training. No additional comments were received. A follow-up qualitative question was asked; *Who should provide the funding for the training and skills provided to businesses?* This question did receive comments.

One respondent suggested that there should be a “single funding body for FE, that is able to match the funding to the specific needs and requirements of the employer.” It was also suggested that the funding should come to the employer via FE; “There should be some government funding to underpin the costs FE encounters and to support businesses who are really struggling and genuinely cannot pay.” A further respondent built upon this by suggesting that a “more creative approach should be taken to fund non listed bespoke training which gives employers access to funded provision specific to their business needs”, rather than perceived needs. This respondent felt there should be the ability “to use a single funding allocation in a way

that brings the best results for the business community and society as a whole.” The respondent suggested that this funding should be provided (presumably by the government) to training organisations such as colleges to use at their discretion, based on demand or need.

Interestingly, no respondent suggested that the employer or employee should provide the funding for the training and skills provided to businesses. Perhaps the idea that funding for business training should be provided via the government was reflective of the beliefs of leaders in FE colleges? This would be surprising, but possibly reflective of the indications from responses within the *Skills Offer* sub-theme. In that sub-theme, indications were found of a possible reliance by FE college leaders on funding to support businesses, or a possible skills gap in sales or business communication in order to convince businesses of the value of investing in training. It would also somewhat contradict one respondent’s opinion that “in my experience, businesses do not appreciate or value ‘free’ as much as if they have to make a contribution.”

It was therefore equally as likely that there was a possible fault in the questioning, or follow-up within the questioning in order to seek clarification. As such, a follow-up question will be included at the main research stage; one that tries not necessarily to lead the respondent to a particular answer, but one that seeks to find out whether they believe businesses or individuals themselves should have a responsibility for providing the funding for training delivered.

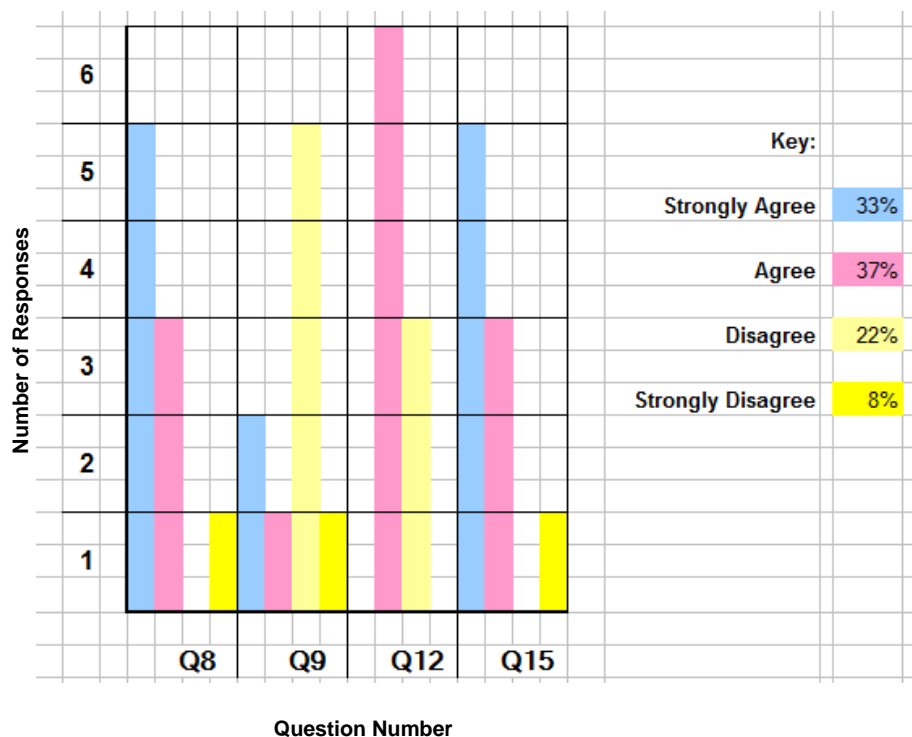
### **Funding – summary and recommendations**

The apparent belief that funding should be provided for businesses so they can access training, that businesses are more inclined to choose training if it is free rather than appropriate, and that businesses value ‘free’ training less than if they contribute to the costs requires closer understanding.



- It is recommended that there is more investigation into respondents' opinions regarding where funding should come from for business skills and training and why they believe this to be appropriate.

### Policy – summary of pilot research



**Table 17**  
**Pilot stage - Quantitative comparison of policy responses**

**Table 17** brings together the relative weightings of responses regarding *policy*. All weightings had four scales to choose from. Overall, there was a relatively mixed spread of responses, with *agree* and *strongly agree* being the favoured options.

Respondents were asked the question: *Do you believe that skills policies for the interaction between Further Education Colleges and businesses in England are formed effectively?* There was a mixed response of replies, but on the whole individuals were

less than positive. One respondent felt that policies were not fully effective and that “the landscape is increasingly confused.” Examples this respondent cited included large employers (over 250 employees) having training needs but being excluded from funding and companies who regularly employ apprentices being excluded from incentive schemes, frustrating many employers. One individual did not believe policies are formed effectively, suggesting that it was “up to individual colleges to develop their own interaction.” A different individual was more positive, but felt that policies were currently aiming lower than they could be;

“The current skills policies are good. However lack of funding has reduced the level of service and diminished the ambition of the skills system. The targets set by the leach report (sic) have been removed as they are unachievable. The UK will therefore become less successful as a result of a poorer skills system.”

When asked whether skills policies for businesses were *determined through effective dialogue with colleges of Further Education in England*, two thirds of respondents either disagreed (5) or strongly disagreed (1). One was not sure “what dialogue there currently is with FE colleges” for determining policy and felt that they were driven by Sector Skills Council or Skills Funding Agency requirements rather than by the voice of Further Education.

If the feeling among respondents was that FE was absent or poorly fared from determining the policies affecting the sector, did they also feel that FE colleges in England should *have a key role in determining skills policies for businesses*? Eight of the nine respondents strongly agreed or agreed; only one individual strongly disagreed. One individual strongly agreed, suggesting it was “essential for Colleges to ensure they are at the forefront of future business development.” This respondent argued that to not do so would put the FE college sector behind its competitors, with skills contracts “being secured by national training providers that could have been delivered by

Colleges.” A “balanced approach should be taken that includes specialist work based providers and other stakeholders” argued a further individual; viewing ‘competitors’ differently; as part of a collective whole across the sector, who could work together with FE colleges in order to determine the best skills policies for businesses.

Positively, two thirds of respondents did believe that the *government values the contribution Further Education colleges make towards business competitiveness*. One respondent suggested that this value was variable “but where there is large scale business activity, I think this is valued.” Another also agreed and believed that sometimes the government “needs help in how they could contribute further” to the sector’s value.

With such a high percentage of respondents believing FE colleges should have a key role in determining skills policies for businesses and noting that there was government recognition of the value contributed towards business competitiveness; did they have close relationships with the key bodies that represent the skills needs of their employers? This would, it was assumed, help to influence national policy. Although respondents agreed this was important, their responses suggested that their relationships were “variable”; “Very, very variable”, or “only in a few areas.”

Surprisingly, some respondents placed the reason for this lack of relationship with the skills bodies themselves. One individual noted that most sector skills councils were largely, and frustratingly, disconnected from FE, whilst another suggested that the reason for this was that some sector skills councils or national skills academies were very proactive, whilst others were less so.

## **Policy – summary and recommendations**

These questions helped to provide a picture of FE leaders' perceptions regarding policy. There was a perception from within the FE sector that their contributions were valued by government, but that they were also excluded from policy making. There did appear to be an admission of inertia from the sector itself too in the lack of relationships it builds with those bodies that represent the skills needs of employers. These bodies are also the ones government or other policy makers would turn to when shaping the policies themselves.

- Without wishing to damage the rich information produced from this sub-theme, a small change is recommended, building upon these perceptions, to understand whether respondents have suggestions for *how* dialogue could improve.
- A very minor point is the recommendation to amend the word *Overall* within the qualitative research to *Policy* so that the topic theme is presented a bit more clearly to participants.

## **Pilot study – summary and recommendations**

The pilot study has been most valuable. In addition to revealing insights into FE leaders' perceptions regarding the question areas chosen, the study has revealed additional areas for consideration, identified as a direct result of the research.

The balance of questions as related to the original Model needs to be reflected upon. Some questions provided little information, for example question 6 (*Businesses choose training and development that is less appropriate to their needs if it is free*), some a great deal, for example question 2 (*Colleges of Further Education in England are the most effective organisations to deliver skills and training to businesses*).

- Responses have been considered and issues of importance to respondents have been incorporated onto the Model (**Model C**) and should help identify the areas for refining prior to the full research study.

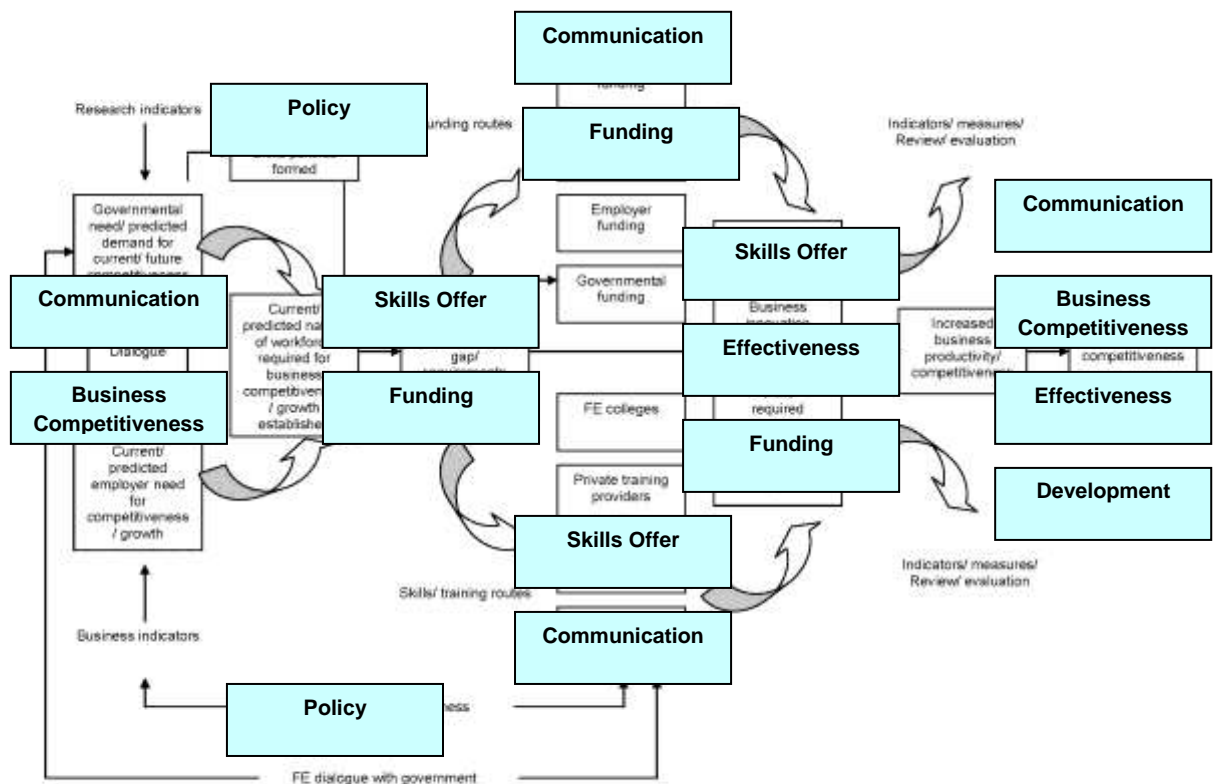
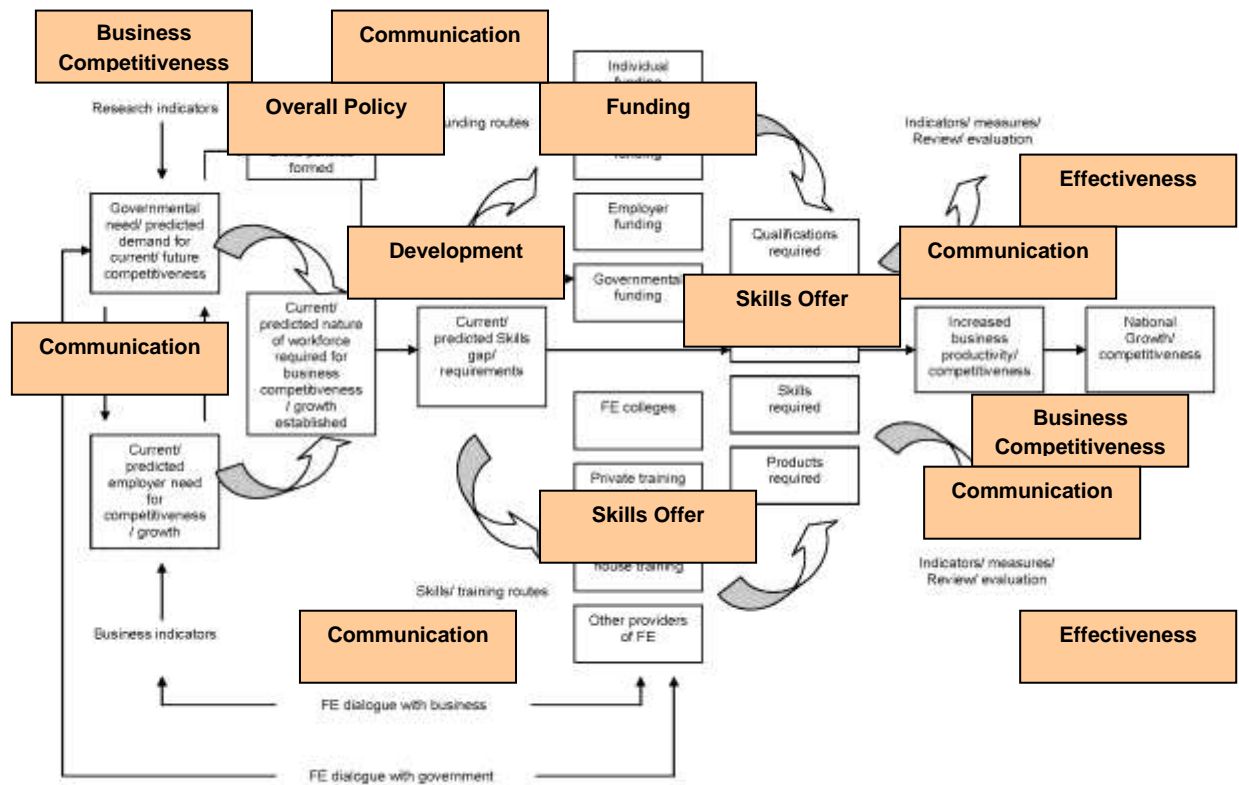
As such, there is now more weighting throughout the study on *Skills Offer, Funding and Policy. Communication* flows throughout all stages. *Effectiveness* (which will include staff skills as well as responsibility and impact upon business effectiveness) will be more strongly embedded at the heart of the competitiveness measures.

For accuracy in reporting the full research information, when defining the questions on the qualitative research, it is recommended that the word *Policy* replaces *Overall* in the section currently at question 15.

Issues previously not considered that will require pursuing are:

- Is the business-responsive function isolated within a college, and is there a lack of an organisation-wide approach to responding to business needs? What barriers to effectiveness does this create?

*Do FE college leaders believe that colleges have a responsibility for developing the effectiveness of businesses?* Questions 6 (*Businesses choose training and development that is less appropriate to their needs if it is free*) and 18 (*We know what our businesses think about the training and support service our college provides*) generated no comments and are covered in other areas of the research. It is recommended that these two questions are removed from the full research.



**Model C**  
**Theoretical flow for FE skills delivery leading to business competitiveness with pilot stage sub-themes (Top) and revised weightings (Below) based on pilot responses**

Questions 11 (*Our college communicates effectively with businesses*) and 13 (*Our college actively seeks feedback from our businesses regarding the training and skills we provide*) should be reviewed to generate more clarity around the area of effective business communication. Question 19 should also be reviewed to understand a bit more about *why* or *how* respondents believe their *college is the first choice for businesses that require training and development*.

A refinement or addition to question 15 (*A national measure of the impact Further Education makes towards business effectiveness would be valuable*) is recommended. This should aim to generate some responses relating to the possible shape or approach this could take, rather than simply agreement or disagreement.

Funding-related questions should be reviewed to include additional points raised by respondents within the pilot study that may aid in analysis as well as provide information on areas that had not been considered prior to the pilot research. The first area is around the idea *should FE colleges deliver the best skills and training to meet employers' business needs rather than that which their funding steers them to deliver?* This is a question that raises potential issues that could impact upon the study, i.e. is there a reliance on funding in order to support businesses within FE, or possibly a skills gap within FE staff that needs addressing?

An additional theme raised at the pilot stage considered the idea of *is there a reason that funding provided for business training (the majority of which comes via governmental agencies) is not able to deliver the most appropriate or effective skills to respond to business need?* As noted within this chapter, it would be interesting to uncover whether there does appear to be a barrier or mismatch in funding being able to meet business skills and training needs, or whether this is more a belief or excuse within the sector for not self-generating income.

As funding appears to be an area that may have a greater bearing than first believed on the impact FE leaders perceive, it is worth considering whether the above recommendations are sufficient or whether more needs to be done to investigate where and why leaders believe funding for businesses should come from.

The next chapter will build upon lessons learned from the pilot study.



## **Chapter 5 – Main Research Design, Implementation and Results**

At the start of **Chapter 4**, key themes for detailed analysis, arrived at through consideration of a literature study, were determined. These are outlined in **Table 10**. This provided the direction and framework for the pilot research. Nine college leaders responded to the pilot research from across the 12 FE colleges invited to participate. These leaders helped to identify whether further topics would need to be considered, as well as clarify the relevance to the focus of the overall research question regarding the themes. Many of the replies were reproduced, with commentary and reflection within **Chapter 4**.

For this research thesis, a pilot study was conducted to determine the appropriateness of the research approach and methodology and also to allow for a process of reflection and pause before conducting the wider research. This followed the consideration that pilot research “plays an important role in developing a sound research project” (Elmes, et al, 2012, p.16). The previous chapter summarised the immediate lessons learned. Before any further research was undertaken, and in order to confirm the purpose and direction for the research, a reflection on the approach, focus and contribution to knowledge, method, and practical application was made.

### **Review of contribution to knowledge to date**

A significant literature review has taken place regarding relevant work related to the research topic. It is of course possible that the author has not uncovered all materials available. However, from the author’s years of study to date, it is believed that the knowledge from the viewpoint of college leaders on the topic of business impact is not widely available and that the research proposed within this thesis could therefore make a genuine contribution to knowledge on this subject.

Reflecting on the research undertaken to date, it is anticipated that the original feedback and perspectives that will be obtained via the full research is highly likely to extend the field of understanding on this topic.

As has been revealed through the study so far, surprising outcomes and issues have already been obtained through the questioning that, despite prior thought and consideration, highlight the fact that there are issues to be explored, as well as gaps in the existing body of work and knowledge. Examples of this were evidenced at the pilot stage; a clear example being the theme of organisations not operating as a whole when responding to business' needs.

This work aims to contribute to knowledge through an original investigation taking place with FE leaders directly associated with the research topic. This is anticipated to add value through widening the boundaries of existing knowledge and work on the subject (Finn, 2005, p.14). As these perspectives have not previously been explored in this way, the research could be valuable in widening knowledge regarding the FE/business relationship and could also add to or enrich future theoretical research on the subject. New knowledge will be identified as a result that will contribute to the wider body of work that exists regarding FE and businesses, which may also have implications for further research.

### **Review of research method chosen**

The method chosen was based on a considered study of research methods and one that was appropriate to the choice of research question. It combined qualitative and quantitative approaches in the pursuit of knowledge.

The method and approach used generated positive results in some aspects, as well as disappointing results in others. The use of surveys worked extremely well. A 5.5%

sample of the full population was chosen for the pilot research, generating responses of between 75% and 41% across the two surveys; exceeding expectations. The method of surveying is recommended for the wider research.

Questions for both surveys were considered carefully for many months before finalising. Coding of sub-themes proved extremely useful in allowing for collation and comparison of responses. The idea of identified areas and a linear progression at the qualitative stage and a random presentation of questions at the quantitative stage were of value as they have provided potentially contradictory results within some responses and opened up new areas for research previously unconsidered.

Interestingly, despite the preparation time, and the considerable research and subject analysis that fed into the questions; on analysis of the pilot findings, some questions were considered weak, offering nothing of value or duplicating responses. Other subjects also arose that would need investigating and developing at the full research stage. This refining of questioning though is viewed as a positive reason for having conducted the pilot research, and is recommended as a method to be used when approaching similar studies. The downside of adding an additional six-eight months to the research process, in this researcher's opinion, is outweighed by the refinements that could be made when investigating the wider population.

The surveys took the sample population slightly longer to complete than was initially considered, and this will be taken into account during the refinements to the questions prior to the full research study.

Disappointments to the method chosen occurred in the lack of opportunity or offer from the pilot sample for face to face interviews. Whilst this may be due to the sample not wishing, or having time, to meet up, it is believed that this is primarily down to the

researcher rather than the sample. In an effort to assure anonymity and distance for the sample population, no method for capturing respondent details or the opportunity for follow-up clarification/discussion was offered. However, this does offer the opportunity for method changes to be made prior to the full research in order to correct this and once again provides justification for conducting a pilot study prior to a full research sample.

### **Consideration of practical application**

From the analysis of the pilot findings, it is believed that there is a strong potential for the full findings to be of practical use. A summary of the findings, conclusions and recommendations will be considered for sharing with the sector as well as the colleges and agencies that have contributed and assisted.

From an FE college leaders' perspective, there will be the benefit of being able to recognise common issues and have the opportunity to reflect upon alternative responses that different colleges have taken. There is also the potential for college leaders to consider implementing methods or approaches that other colleges have taken. Issues identified may offer the sector itself a springboard to bring a shared voice to certain issues, (for example on funding or business training), that they may not have had evidence or information for previously. This could be done through a representative body, for example the Association of Colleges, or directly through collaboration or local discussions.

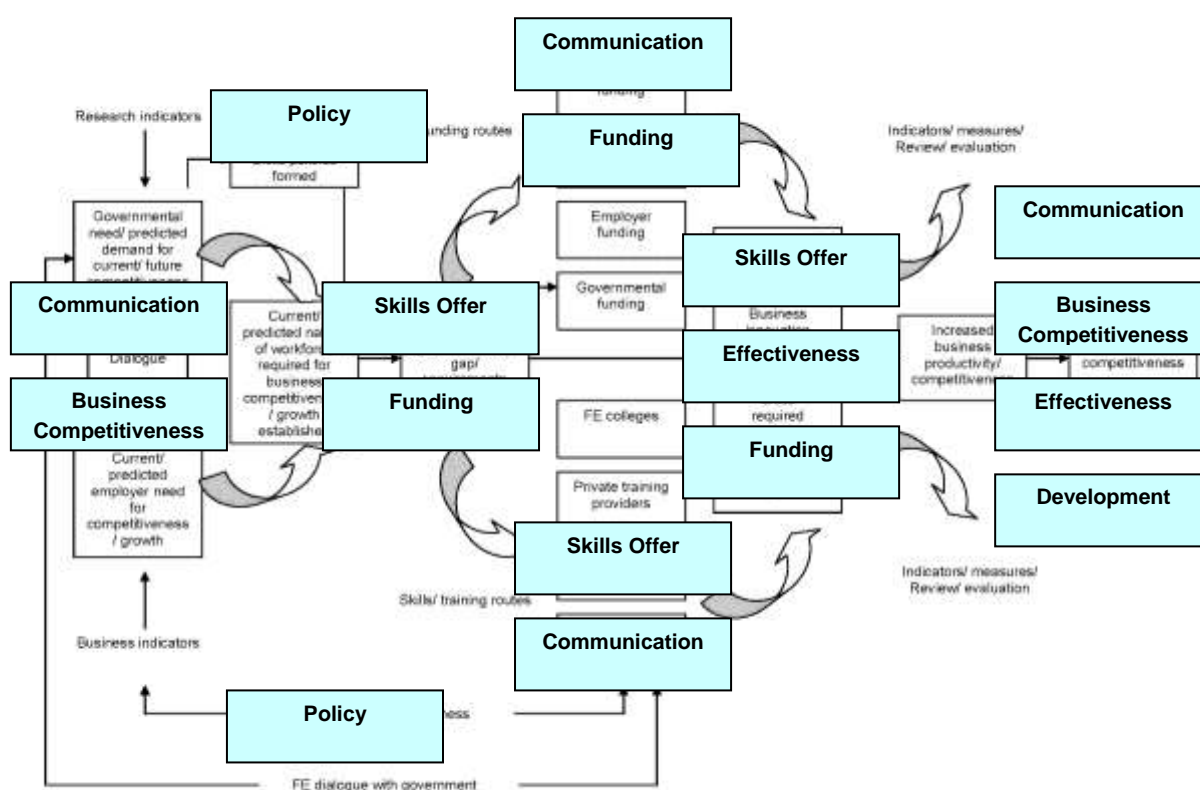
From an agency or policy perspective, the findings may provide an opportunity to consider the impact of current or planned policies on the area of the FE college/employer relationship and whether there is an opportunity to refine or add to any as a result. This may be useful in planning funding allocations, in making decisions regarding future sector curriculum developments, or, from a viewpoint wider

than training, in helping to join up other policies (for example inward investment, contracting, research and development, etc.) with skills and training.

### Review of the Model in light of theory and responses to date

Following the implementation and analysis of the pilot study, the theorised model (**Model A**) was refined (**Model C**). The model has been extremely useful in helping to determine the relative weighting and importance of themes for sub-questions.

Although the model remains of use, the theme overlays restrict clarity.



**Model C (section – re-presented)**

In order to present the information more clearly, the model has been refined and reinterpreted, as shown in **Model D**. In this way, the model has significantly evolved from the initial proposal stage as a direct result of the research findings to date. Through pilot research, the relative weightings of themes have been adjusted and determined, as discussed in the reflection on questions section. The model now

presents a theoretical continuous cycle of interactions taking place in order to support business competitiveness, based upon research and feedback undertaken at the pilot stage.



#### Model D

*Theoretical flow for FE skills delivery leading to business competitiveness refined following pilot research*

## **Review of the research question**

This research is an investigation into the impact leaders of colleges of further education in England believe their organisations contribute towards business competitiveness.

As reflected upon earlier, this is an original work of research which aims to not only contribute to the field of knowledge and understanding on this topic, but may also have the added benefit of practical application.

It is appropriate at this stage to note that, during the course of the research to date, and as a result of the pilot research, the research question has been reflected upon to ensure that as the study evolves it remains a worthy and realistic area for investigation.

The main research question has evolved as a result of the work undertaken to date. The original proposal asked the tentative question *what contribution to UK business competitiveness do colleges of further education make?* (Maykels, 2009, p.1). This starting point for consideration considered the connection between further education and business competitiveness, but from a different perspective to the one that has evolved. The direction taken would have been one of the impact of policies upon businesses and FE delivery within England. However, once the literature study began, the focus moved to one that asked *do colleges of further education contribute to the competitiveness of businesses in England?* This was as a result of an analysis of the literature and research methodology theories. These revealed a potential gap in knowledge for a focussed study from a further education provider perspective, rather than such a broad coverage (businesses, policy makers, FE staff, other stakeholders) that the initial question could have led to, which was supported by theories relating to continuous evolution of the research process. The question continued to evolve up to the pilot research stage, by which point, the focus had been narrowed further to one

that asked *do leaders of colleges of further education in England believe that they contribute towards business competitiveness?*

As a result of the pilot research, slight modifications to the focus of the question were again made, which have been incorporated within the title of this thesis. Having reflected on the direction and responses obtained during the pilot research stage, it was felt that the essence of impact was missing from the overarching research question.

The overarching research question, upon reflection, did not quite encapsulate the nature of FE leaders' perceptions of impact or allow for the depth of questioning and responses that were being obtained. As a direct result of reflecting upon the pilot research, the research question was modified to include this understanding of impact to: *an investigation into the impact leaders of colleges of further education in England believe their organisations contribute towards business competitiveness.*

This refinement follows recommended practice which recognises that "sampling, data collection, data analysis, and interpretation take place simultaneously in qualitative research, which may cause the researcher to modify the original research question to better understand the phenomenon of interest" (Whittemore and Melkus, 2008, p.204). Reflection on the research question is recommended as it is recognised that as the research process evolves it "may become necessary to revise your research question as you go along, making it more specific and reflective of your emerging understanding" (Kirby, et al, 2006, p.19). It has been noted that as research is tested and reflected upon, modifications may be needed to words in the research question to further determine the focus (Miller-Cochran and Rodrigo, 2014, p.75). This evolution of the research question is a direct result of reflection on the feedback and findings



obtained from the pilot research and is considered to have the strongest potential to produce illuminating feedback in the areas identified within the model.

The sub-questions also needed refining, as discussed in **Chapter 4**. Some were no longer required; some needed amending; others needed creating. This was based on an analysis of direct feedback from the sample respondents themselves and will be used to help strengthen the understanding and knowledge obtained from the overall research.

Using the analysis of responses undertaken in **Chapter 4**, the following tables present the questions that will be used during the full research study.

**Table 18** presents the quantitative study. This has been refined from 20 to 18 questions to allow for a faster response time, and questions have been created or amended as a result of the feedback received, as shown in **Table 19**. There will also be the opportunity for respondents to leave additional comments to each answer.

**Table 20** presents the qualitative study. This has been refined from 15 questions to 12 and refocused, based on responses to and consideration of the pilot research. Additional (optional) respondent details will be requested at both stages of the full research, in order to allow the researcher to follow up and directly question or seek clarification from respondents if appropriate.

The revised coding for the sub-themes is shown on the tables and combined as an overview in **Table 21**.

<b>Refined Coded Themes</b>	<b>Question</b>	<b>Response Options</b>	
Impact	1. Colleges of further education in England contribute towards business competitiveness through the business training and development they provide.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
Impact	2. Our College measures the impact its training has upon business competitiveness.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
Dialogue	3. Businesses understand the benefits our college can make to their competitiveness.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
Products/ Delivery	4. The training and development our college provides to businesses is solely based on their business need.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
Dialogue, Products, Impact	5. Qualifications are the most effective way to make a positive impact upon business competitiveness.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
Delivery	6. Our college has an organisation-wide approach to responding to the needs of businesses.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
Dialogue/ Products/ Delivery/ Impact	7. Our College responds rapidly to the changing needs of businesses.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
Dialogue	8. Colleges of further education in England should have a key role in determining skills policies for businesses.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
Dialogue	9. Skills policies for businesses are determined through effective dialogue with colleges of further education in England.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
Products/ Impact	10. Governmental funding for business training is focussed on businesses competitiveness	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
Dialogue	11. The government values the contribution further education colleges make towards business competitiveness.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
Dialogue/ Impact	12. Our college actively seeks feedback from our businesses regarding the training and skills we provide.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
Products	13. Our college continuously invests resources to research and develop products that support the competitiveness of our businesses.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
Products/ Impact	14. Nationally recognised qualifications are the most effective way of making businesses more competitive.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
Dialogue	15. Our college has a close relationship with the key bodies that represent the skills needs of our employers.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
Products/ Delivery	16. Our college will always recommend training and skills solutions that contribute towards a business' competitiveness, rather than solutions that are steered by funding.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
Dialogue/ Impact	17. Our college is the first choice for training and development from the businesses and employers we approach.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree
Impact	18. The training and development our college provides to businesses increases their competitiveness.	Strongly agree Disagree	Agree Strongly disagree

**Table 18**  
**Summary overview of quantitative research questions**  
**revised following pilot study**

<b>Original Question</b>	<b>Modification</b>	<b>Reason</b>
Colleges of Further education in England are the most effective organisations to deliver skills and training to businesses.	<b>Removed.</b>	More specific detail required – picked up in qualitative analysis re effectiveness.
Businesses choose training and development that is less appropriate to their needs if it is free.	<b>Removed and replaced with:</b> Governmental funding for business training is focussed on businesses competitiveness	More focussed funding questions asked across quantitative and qualitative analysis to provide clarification.
Our college invests resources in research and development for business training.	<b>Replaced with:</b> Our college continuously invests resources to research and develop products that support the competitiveness of our businesses.	More focussed
n/a	<b>New question:</b> Qualifications are the most effective way to make a positive impact upon business competitiveness.	Introduced to investigate feedback that suggested this may not be the most effective way, but it is the easiest funding route.
n/a	<b>New question:</b> Our college has an organisation-wide approach to responding to the needs of businesses.	Introduced as an issue discovered at the pilot stage.
Our college communicates effectively with businesses.	<b>Removed</b>	More focussed question recommended as a result of feedback. Communication picked up in qualitative analysis.
The image of our college is appropriate for communicating with businesses.	<b>Removed</b>	Communication picked up in qualitative analysis.
A national measure of the impact Further Education makes towards business effectiveness would be valuable.	<b>Removed</b>	Modification included in qualitative analysis as a result of feedback.
n/a	<b>New question:</b> Our college will always recommend training and skills solutions that contribute towards a business' competitiveness, rather than solutions that are steered by funding.	Introduced as an issue discovered at the pilot stage.
We know what our businesses think about the training and support services our college provides	<b>Removed</b>	Generated no comments.
Our college is the first choice for businesses that require training and development.	<b>Replaced with:</b> Our college is the first choice for training and development from the businesses and employers we approach.	Recommendation from pilot stage.

**Table 19**  
**Modifications to quantitative research questions**  
**revised following pilot study**

<b>Refined Coded Themes</b>	<b>Question</b>
Products/ Delivery	<b>1. What responsibility should further education colleges have for ensuring their offer and delivery contributes to economic effectiveness?</b>
Impact	<b>2. How do you measure the contribution you make to the effectiveness of the businesses you support?</b> E.g. Surveys, Direct feedback, Jobs created, Referrals
Impact	<b>3. Have you examples where your further education college has directly made a positive impact upon business competitiveness?</b>
Delivery	<b>4. Why should colleges of further education provide skills and training support to local businesses?</b>
Delivery/ Impact	<b>5. What types of providers deliver the most effective service to employers?</b> E.g. Further Education Colleges, Universities, Private Training Providers
Dialogue/ Products/ Delivery/ Impact	<b>6. Which types of providers are the most effective at responding rapidly to the changing needs of the businesses they support? Do you have an example?</b> E.g. Further Education Colleges, Universities, Private Training Providers
Impact/ Dialogue	<b>7. What benefit would there be to colleges in a national measure of the impact further education makes towards business competitiveness?</b> If of benefit, what would be your preferred way of measuring?
Products/ Delivery	<b>8. Where should funding to support businesses' growth and competitiveness come from?</b> E.g. Employers, Employees, Government, Sector Skills Councils, Universities
Dialogue/ Impact	<b>9. What do you believe businesses think about the value further education colleges provide?</b>
Dialogue/ Impact	<b>10. What do you believe the government thinks about the value further education colleges provide?</b>
Dialogue	<b>11. How could communication between businesses, funding bodies, policy makers, universities and further education colleges be improved?</b>
Dialogue/ Products/ Delivery/ Impact	<b>12. How do you communicate with businesses in order to find out what they think about the training and services your college provides?</b> E.g. Business forum, Surveys, Direct feedback, Events

**Table 20**  
**Summary overview of qualitative research questions**  
**revised following pilot study**

<b>Revised Coded Sub-Themes</b>	<b>Qualitative Question Numbers</b>	<b>Quantitative Question Numbers</b>
<b>Dialogue</b>	6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12	3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 15, 17
<b>Products</b>	1, 6, 8, 12	4, 5, 7, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16
<b>Delivery</b>	1, 4, 5, 6, 8, 12	4, 6, 7, 16
<b>Impact</b>	2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 12	1, 2, 5, 7, 10, 12, 14, 17, 18

**Table 21**  
**Coded sub-themes for analysis of qualitative and quantitative data**  
**revised following pilot study**

### **Analysis of research**

It is “usually impossible for a researcher to observe every individual in a population” (Gravetter and Wallnau, 2008, p. 189). As well as identifying a population size, a researcher must also consider the reality of being able to reach a meaningful sample of the desired audience in order to conduct the research. This element should not be underestimated.

The maximum population size at the time of conducting the research was 219. A consideration was made by the researcher as to the best way, not just to reach a significant proportion of this population, but to be done in a way that would be considered and responded to by the recipient.

Several routes were chosen to approach and access the population. The researcher’s opinion was that an approach via an organisation or body recognised by potential respondents would have more likelihood of being considered, rather than by busy leaders of FE colleges receiving an approach from an unknown individual.

To this end, several organisations were approached in the hope that some would see value in the research topic and be interested, not only in supporting the research, but also in the conclusions and recommendations following completion.

Several organisations and bodies were approached to support this process:

- The Association of Colleges (AoC)<sup>17</sup>,
- The United Kingdom Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES)<sup>18</sup>,
- NEF, The Innovation Institute<sup>19</sup>,
- National Skills Academy Nuclear<sup>20</sup>,
- The 157 Group<sup>21</sup>,
- A group of college leaders undertaking a Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS)<sup>22</sup> senior leadership and management course.

This approach resulted in the following:

- The AoC supported this research at a North West level, sending the information to its network of 36 members on the researcher's behalf in April 2013. See

***Appendix G.***

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<sup>17</sup> The AoC exists to represent and promote the interests of Colleges and provide members with professional support services. As well as representing colleges nationally, it has regional offices that can more closely support and respond to its members' needs. <http://www.aoc.co.uk/>

<sup>18</sup> UKCES is a publicly funded, industry led organisation providing strategic leadership on skills and employment issues in the four home nations of the UK. <https://www.ukces.org.uk/>

<sup>19</sup> NEF: The Innovation Institute is a professional body and a leading provider of science and technological innovation and growth services to business, education and government. NEF: The Innovation Institute influences policy and supports its members, partners and stakeholders to achieve performance excellence and stimulate innovation. <http://www.thenef.org.uk/home>

<sup>20</sup> Part of the national skills academy network, the Nuclear Academy works with employers, government and skills providers to ensure skills are available to meet industry needs. <https://www.nuclear.nsacademy.co.uk/>

<sup>21</sup> The 157 Group is a membership organisation that represents 28 large, successful and regionally influential Further Education colleges in England. <http://www.157group.co.uk/>

<sup>22</sup> LSIS was formed to accelerate quality improvement, increase participation and raise standards and achievement in the learning and skills sector in England. <http://www.lsis.org.uk/>

- NEF The Innovation Institute supported the research and included the information in its newsletter. See **Appendix H**. A website was set up by the researcher (<http://fe-research-study.vpweb.co.uk/?prefix=www>) with the survey links included for NEF members and this request was sent to 30 colleges in July 2013. See **Appendix I**.
- The National Skills Academy Nuclear supported the research and sent the web page to 3 of its college members in July 2013
- The survey links were distributed to 20 college leaders undertaking a leadership course in May 2013.
- The survey was distributed to 28 colleges within the 157 Group in July 2013. See **Appendix J**.

Through these varied methods of approach, 117 requests were distributed to the population. As some organisations had the same college within their membership, this resulted in a total of 82 unique colleges approached. See **Appendix K**. This resulted in wide and effective distribution of the research, a positive response from bodies approached, and achievement of a significant and manageable coverage of the population (37% of total population). This was believed to be a meaningful sample size for one researcher to manage, as well as one that was likely to provide enough return responses in order to be able to interpret and draw conclusions of value.

It must be noted that, due to the wide nature of membership across these supportive organisations, it was not possible to exclude colleges that had been previously contacted at the pilot stage. The potential downside of this from a response perspective was that the same response may have been obtained from the same individual, offering the researcher nothing new and weakening the conclusions.

However, the positives of having access to such a wide range of contacts and potential respondents was deemed to offset this, coupled with the fact that revisions had taken place to many areas of questioning. In total, there was one respondent from the pilot stage that also participated at the main stage.

The research was conducted between 29<sup>th</sup> April 2013 and 31<sup>st</sup> July 2013. By 31<sup>st</sup> July 14 responses had been received to the quantitative survey (17% response) and 6 responses to the qualitative survey (7%). Although these numbers are greater than those achieved in the pilot study, in percentage terms of the population surveyed, they are less. Reflections on the strengths and limitations of the research will be reflected upon in **Chapter 7**.

As with the pilot study, the research covered questions relating to the investigation into the impact leaders of colleges of further education in England believe that their organisations contribute towards business competitiveness. Each question also allowed the respondent the opportunity to add some additional text to support their answer if required. The quantitative research, conducted as an online survey, should have taken between five and ten minutes to complete. No questions or answers were compulsory. The survey questions are shown in **Appendix L** and a complete record of responses is presented as **Appendix M**. Graphical representations of each individual response are also presented at **Appendix M**. Indications of whether any respondent skipped the question or included an additional response are included with these graphs, along with the responses as they were presented. No text has been altered and any grammatical errors have been retained. All responses were collated anonymously. Individual respondent replies have been recorded in **Appendix M**. Eight respondents left additional comments; six did not.



As with the pilot stage, response times varied considerably. The revision of questions did have the intended result of reducing the average time from 15 minutes 54 seconds to 10 minutes 15 seconds and the median from 11 minutes 12 seconds to 5 minutes 53 seconds (see **Table 22**).

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>Number of comments</b>
F	2 minutes 3 seconds		0
N	2 minutes 21 seconds		0
G	2 minutes 27 seconds		0
H	2 minutes 41 seconds		0
A	2 minutes 44 seconds		0
D	3 minutes 41 seconds		4
K	4 minutes 49 seconds	<b>5 minutes 53 seconds</b>	0
J	6 minutes 57 seconds	<b>5 minutes 53 seconds</b>	4
E	8 minutes 18 seconds		3
L	8 minutes 31 seconds		6
I	9 minutes 26 seconds		8
B	16 minutes 34 seconds		12
C	18 minutes 7 seconds		11
M	55 minutes 16 seconds		7
<b>Mean</b>	<b>10 minutes 15 seconds</b>		<b>3.9</b>

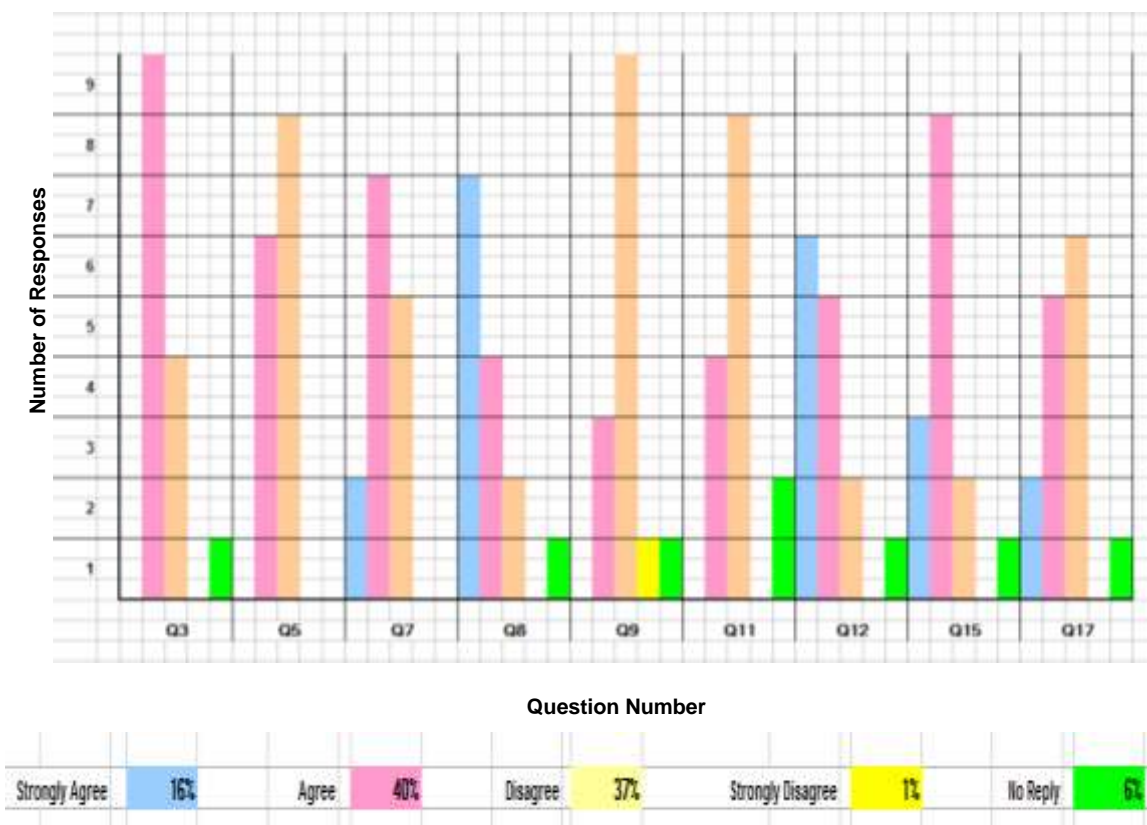
**Table 22**  
**Overview of main research response times**

The times have been collated from the start and finish point of the survey and a wide range of responsive times, from 2 minutes 3 seconds to 55 minutes 16 seconds, were received.

Breakdowns of all responses received from both surveys can be found in full detail in **Appendices M** and **O**. The grammar presented in the Appendices is as received from the respondents.

The following analysis brings together the quantitative (**Table 18**) and qualitative (**Table 20**) surveys under the coded themes of *Dialogue*, *Products*, *Delivery* and *Impact*, which was revised following a reflection of the pilot research (**Table 21**).

### Dialogue – summary of research



Question Number

Table 23

### Quantitative comparison of dialogue responses

**Table 23** brings together the relative weightings of responses. All weightings had four scales to choose from, ranging from *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree*. No questions were compulsory and respondents could also choose not to reply. Analysis of the chart shows a slightly higher percentage in strong agreement/agreement with the questions (56%) than disagreement/strong disagreement (38%).

The first area for consideration by respondents was whether they believed that employers understood the benefits their college could make to their business' competitiveness. *Agree* responses (69.2%) significantly outweighed *Disagree* (30.8%). One respondent who agreed noted that many do "and have excellent partnerships with us", whilst also pointing out that "many do not in relation to their specific competitiveness." This was echoed by another respondent; "It's variable although in the majority it's understood but not formally measured." One respondent in agreement highlighted the way their college supported business competitiveness; through the use of business advisors who work closely with employers to identify the best fit of training to the bottom line of their business.

An alternative perspective was offered by one respondent who was in disagreement. They presented the opinion that many businesses do not understand the benefits a college can make "and they have preconceptions of what colleges do." This negative reflection on preconception was said despite the fact that the respondent's college did, they believed, have some very good employer links, some of whom have had staff or students who used to work in their business "so they know what we can do and how we can help." This theme was similar for another respondent who, despite being in agreement, noted that there is "more work to do on raising awareness of the part FE plays" in supporting business competitiveness.

The theme of business perception of FE was picked up further through questioning that asked what FE leaders believed businesses thought about the value further education colleges provide. "Mixed" was the opinion from the first respondent; "some would be very positive; others may be indifferent or perhaps have had a poor experience." This response was very similar to those from other respondents. "Mixed depending on level of engagement" was one such comment; "some highly value, other(s) do not" was another. One respondent believed that the businesses they worked with thought the

value was good, but that there were some, perhaps specialised, businesses that had never used a college who would not agree. The most varied reflection came from one respondent who suggested that in general, businesses “belief is anecdotal and not based on facts.” This was further elaborated by suggesting that businesses did not “understand the restrictions in the funding and typically assume colleges should be able to deliver what they want, when they want it at little or no cost. This leads to raised expectations that result in less satisfaction.”

The latter point was an interesting perspective. There was almost a suggestion of businesses and employers themselves being at fault for having a lack of understanding and awareness of the problems that FE colleges face. This author would suggest that business understanding should come through successful dialogue and communication with colleges and an appropriate responsiveness on the part of colleges, rather than an assumption that employers should somehow know, or care.

A further question was asked to gather opinions as to whether respondents believed colleges did respond rapidly to the changing needs of businesses. 74.3% of respondents believed colleges did. One in agreement shared that their college had “a bespoke business unit that works closely with industry to both support and deliver their needs” and used a mixture of consultants and college staff to do so. This theme of a bespoke unit within the college received a mixed response, reflecting themes similar to those that had been uncovered in the pilot study. For some, there was the positive response, as noted in the previous comment. For others, when it came to being responsive, it could mean that the business development department was responsive “but not the whole college.” This imperfect approach could also mean that different areas of a college may be “at different stages in terms of their responsiveness and prioritisation of this”, which could lead to an inconsistency of experiences for businesses. One respondent who felt a reason their college was not responsive was

because their “procedures are very risk averse and so make it impossible to respond rapidly, though everyone responds as quickly as they can.”

Having considered their own organisation, respondents were also asked which type of providers they believed to be the most effective at responding rapidly to the changing needs of the businesses they support. Responses were balanced. “All have their merits”, one respondent suggested. “Good practice will naturally exist in all organisations”, added another; “It would be damaging to the sector to suggest otherwise. The key is having sufficient resource to communicate and manage the employer relationship effectively (and consistently).” Some respondents favoured their own sector in response to this question. One respondent supported this viewpoint by noting that FE colleges were diverse, had generally excellent industry links and could scale up at relatively short notice. Another in favour of FE colleges suggested this was because they “have a proven track record of responsiveness and consistency in a forever changing environment.” Balanced with these responses were respondents who believed that private training providers were more responsive. Strengths noted in this area were due to a belief that these organisations were more focussed as “specialised training providers delivering in a niche area”, or because it was felt that “they have much more flexible and responsive infrastructures.”

Further consideration around the themes of communication and responsiveness was provided when the subject was raised regarding the role FE colleges played in determining skills policies for business. Respondents were fairly united in their opinions of whether colleges should have a key role in this area, with 84.6% in agreement or strong agreement. One respondent who strongly agreed said this was because they already had “a long successful track record of developing and delivering skills strategies and excellent existing partnerships in place.” Another respondent noted that “I feel strongly that this should be the case – FE colleges have a significant

amount of intel to share.” Whilst the majority of respondents believed that FE colleges should have a key role in determining these policies, 76.9% of respondents felt that skills policies for businesses were not currently determined through effective dialogue, noting that “there is a lot to do to make this “effective dialogue” with all sectors, businesses and industry.”

Reflecting on this, consideration was made as to whether respondents had ideas regarding how communication between businesses, funding bodies, policy makers, universities and further education colleges could be improved. “Absolutely”, was one response; “FE needs to be given a higher profile around all tables, not just a token representative.” This was echoed by another respondent who believed communication could definitely be improved. With reductions in public investment happening at the same time as a UK imperative for the development of skills for economic growth, it was pointed out that *employment* was the key. Employment, the respondent believed, “should be the hub that links all those engaged in skills and drive everyone’s perspective. This is not always the case.”

Time could be a barrier to effective communication, particularly for some businesses. It was mentioned that there was a “need to recognise time costs for employers” when involving employers in communication-related issues. For those organisations that are restricted by time, or unable to articulate their voice, there was a feeling that those who do represent employers, such as Sector Skills Councils, “need to be stronger and consistent.” This point was also picked up by another respondent, who felt that there were “inevitably good examples of communication, but the landscape is arguably cluttered” with representative bodies. The respondent argued that there were elements of the employer-voice which were not heard. “Who truly speaks for small and medium sized businesses? Any system with clear lines of information, clear and concise processing and tangible outputs will work.” This respondent’s opinion highlighted their

belief in a communications process of unnecessary over-complexity, concluding that; “if you tried to plot the stakeholders of this system it would be staggeringly complex – does it really need to be?”

Acknowledging personal opinions regarding the communications system, did respondents feel that within this process the government valued the contribution further education colleges made towards business competitiveness? Two thirds of respondents disagreed. One who disagreed felt that the government “does not convey this message” adding as a reason the fact that they did not believe the government understood the contribution further education makes to the United Kingdom’s economy. A further respondent suggested that most FE colleges “would claim to be under-represented”, although FE was championed by bodies such as the Association of Colleges at a national level. The value the government placed on FE colleges could be better, a further respondent believed, suggesting that representatives should visit colleges more often to engage with them and see the work being done. Not all disagreed; one respondent believed that the government’s opinion was generally a very good one, “with the caveat that the market should be encouraged to provide a competitive dynamic to support standards and performance.” This was balanced by another who believed government valued the contribution FE made towards young people, “perhaps less so towards employers.”

Change, perhaps, was a reason for uncertainty with the government’s perception, and possibly not helped by changes in government. “At this moment in time” suggested one respondent “I have concerns that ‘government’ ‘think’ and ‘FE’ just don’t go together.” One respondent considered this issue and was “not sure – the message varies year on year” but was under the impression that the government did not value the sector.

The consideration of change was taken further in a statement from one respondent somewhat reflective of findings in this research study's first chapter; "FE sometimes feels like the educational area that is most tinkered with by successive governments." It was suggested that "the sector needs more stability" due to the fact that for leaders working within FE "curriculum reform has become an annual occupational hazard." This was reflected upon by another respondent, who noted that "Ministers generally seem knowledgeable and interested", suggesting a positive awareness of the sector.

Change in itself therefore is possibly not the issue; rather the focus or nature of the change. Perhaps, the respondent considered, "policies and strategies often seem focussed on unnecessary change that has little impact", citing the introduction of diplomas, continual qualifications reform, technical baccalaureate and traineeships as examples. These, the respondent suggested, had little positive impact as they bring nothing new, just different names. They suggest that the "amount of time remodelling course titles" and changing information systems to accommodate "must be staggering." For true governmental value in FE to be felt, this respondent concluded that what the sector needed was vision and direction; "a ten year charter of stability and consistency aligned to world class standards."

### **Dialogue – summary of themes**

The refining of questions and grouping into themes around *Dialogue* has provided a richness of response and themes from respondents. Summarised below are the key themes identified from these responses. These will be reviewed together with themes from the other collated sections as part of the *Reflections on the Wider Research* section later in this chapter.



There is a belief that businesses have preconceived ideas of further education colleges and the perceived benefits that colleges can add to their business competitiveness.

This theme of preconception is carried through in the belief FE leaders felt that businesses placed on the value of their college. The suggestion was that businesses had unrealistic expectations of what FE could provide, and wanted that provision at little or no cost. These expectations, based it was said on a lack of understanding of the nature of the funding FE colleges receive, resulted in less satisfaction for businesses.

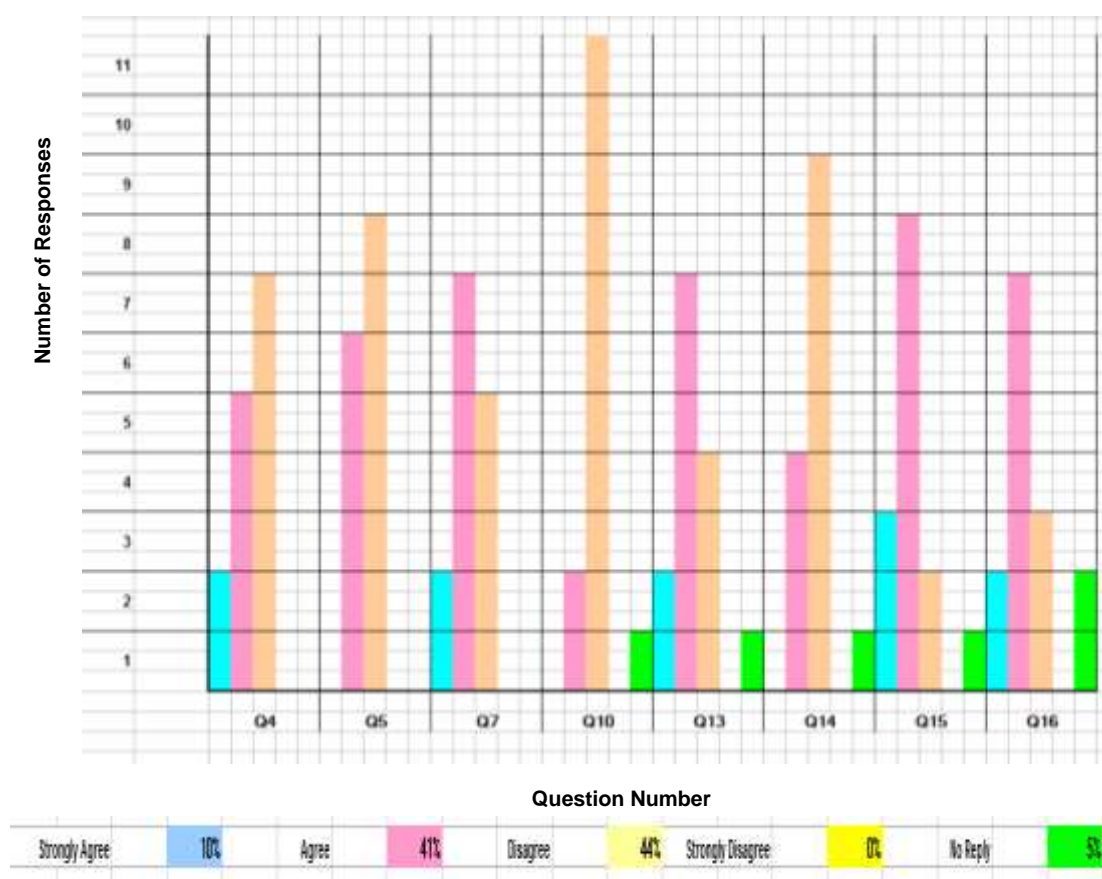
FE leaders believed themselves to be responsive in a forever changing environment, but this continual change was also felt to be a destabilising factor for the sector.

The impact of continuous change caused FE leaders to be uncertain of the perception the government had of the sector. Change in itself was not felt to be of negative value; however unnecessary change with a lack of anything new was felt to be a hindrance.

A business-department-led rather than a college-wide approach to business and employer responsiveness was once again received from respondents. This lack of an organisation-wide employer focus could, it was admitted, lead to an inconsistent approach to business responsiveness.

Overall, from a *Dialogue* perspective, there appeared to be a feeling that the FE sector could be more engaged with businesses, government and policy makers. Whilst there was a desire for all involved to be closer, it was acknowledged that there was a lot more that needed to be done before dialogue would truly be effective.

## Products – summary of research



**Table 24**  
**Quantitative comparison of products responses**

**Table 24** brings together the relative weightings of responses. All weightings had four scales to choose from, ranging from *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree*. No questions were compulsory and respondents could also choose not to reply. Analysis of the chart shows a slightly higher percentage in strong agreement/agreement with the questions (51%) than disagreement/strong disagreement (44%).

Considering the theoretical flow presented in **Model D**, the development of products focussed on business needs and driving economic competitiveness should derive from effective communication and dialogue between all parties. As outlined in the previous section, there was some disagreement from respondents as to the effectiveness or

inclusiveness of all parties in the dialogue stage. It would be interesting to see how respondents considered the product development stage in light of this mixed response.

Respondents were split 50:50 in consideration of the question regarding whether the training and development their college provided to businesses was solely based on their business need. One respondent who disagreed felt that although their approach was improving significantly and quickly, they could not “claim that it is solely based on their business need, as other factors come into play”; citing funding or qualifications as drivers. A further respondent also disagreed, also citing funding and qualifications as a reason. “A lot of the training carried out is to maximise funding and can be based on qualifications that attract funding. Bespoke employer training is much more effective in delivering the needs of business.”

The fact that funding or qualifications which determine the product delivery is perceived to be a negative driver would seem to be an assumption that leaders felt there was misalignment with the product offer that attracted government funding compared with one that would support business competitiveness. This was borne out when 84.6% disagreed with the statement for consideration as to whether government funding for business training was focussed on business competitiveness. Although it was seen to be improving, there was a feeling, articulated by one respondent that the focus was “short term and still overly tied into qualification outcomes.”

A respondent who did feel their college solely delivered training to meet business need noted that it was not all about qualifications, funding and competitiveness. Sometimes colleges played an essential role in helping to ensure that organisations were updated with training that met legal requirements. “Business need can be in terms of legislative requirements which don’t directly improve performance, although without it would prevent parts or all of the business from operating.”

When it came to business need, one respondent made an interesting observation that “organisations don’t fully understand what colleges can offer so can’t align it to business need.” This was an interesting and unexpected observation, similar to one received in the *Dialogue* feedback. It seemingly reverses the customer-provider position and appears to place the responsibility for any lack of business-college participation on the business themselves. The intention behind the comment was more likely to be one of poor communication between colleges and businesses; however the phrasing did reveal the possibility of a college-focussed rather than customer-focussed approach from some colleges.

This focus of the approach was tested in further questioning, which also attempted to further understand the nature of funded training. Did colleges always recommend training and skills solutions that contributed towards a business’ competitiveness, rather than solutions steered by funding? Despite the position on the previous questions, 75% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they did. One who did agree admitted that it was a “close call this one”, as although they were committed to this aim, the funding and qualifications system was only slowly beginning to facilitate this. Sometimes there may be an alignment between funding and business need. Where possible, one respondent would “try and combine the two...Normally a fit can be found, but not always.” A respondent who disagreed felt there was an element of “funding chasing” from colleges, who were encouraged through funding to enrol people inappropriately.

The general direction of responses did seem to bear out the feeling from the *Dialogue* section, particularly a lack of college-business-government engagement, leading to funding misalignment; at least from a college leaders’ perspective. However, should it matter that some training and skills has funding attached and some do not? If a

solution was appropriate to contribute towards a business' competitiveness, what responsibility should further education colleges have for ensuring their offer and delivery contributed to that? This question generated a reasonable level of response, with one respondent suggesting that:

“A responsible College should align its curriculum strategy with the requirements of national, regional and local skills needs. That may be addressing the national requirement for STEM<sup>23</sup> graduates or responding to the employment needs of local industry and business.”

This responsibility was seen to be a “significant and important” one by a further respondent and should, in their opinion, be a driver for the vast majority of outcomes. In addition, they added a wider perspective, noting that “FE quite rightly seeks to engage with many students who require considerable time and support to become ready to contribute to economic effectiveness, and this should be recognised.” This responsibility continued in further replies, suggesting that colleges “should take ownership” of the responsibility to research labour market information and deliver appropriate training to respond to job and business opportunities.

One viewpoint was that, although colleges have a responsibility, “funding needs to be sufficient” to support this activity, as well as measure it. This respondent suggested that the way adult funding was currently provided “there isn't sufficient resource to do this.” When asked where funding should come from to support business' growth and competitiveness, all who responded cited the government, with many balancing this between government, employers and the agencies that represent them. No one mentioned the possibility of resources coming from a college itself. This response was quite telling, particularly when considering 69.2% agreed or strongly agreed that their

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<sup>23</sup> STEM: Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

college continuously invested resources to research and develop products that support the competitiveness of their businesses.

Products to support business competitiveness cover a wide range of existing qualifications, as well as the potential to develop unique ones specifically tailored to the needs of individual organisations. Considering this perspective, and the fact that many qualifications have government funding attached to them, were qualifications the most effective way of making businesses more competitive? 69.2% of respondents disagreed and 57.1% also disagreed that qualifications were the most effective way to make a positive impact upon business competitiveness. One respondent who disagreed noted that businesses did not always need qualifications and that impact should be “more about the need of the business” rather than qualifications for the workforce. This was supported by another respondent who suggested that training which meets the business needs of employers “is more beneficial. Many qualifications are outdated and do not meet employer needs.”

“Training or intervention can have the same outcome as a qualification based delivery”, was the opinion of one respondent. One who did agree that there was a positive value and positive business impact from qualifications was not sure that there was any evidence for this. Others had a balanced view, voicing opinions that, although qualifications had an important impact, un-accredited training also had a role to play. It was suggested that sessions for businesses on areas such as “strategic marketing, design for manufacture, performance management...can arguably have more instant impact.” A point noted in balance by one respondent was that “if a learning/skills development session has a qualification or credit value then it is much more likely that it has had rigour in its design, has clearly defined outcomes and has a level of measure.” This was tempered with the observation from the respondent that not all

“nationally recognised qualifications are sufficiently up-to-date to deliver competitive skills.”

### **Products – summary of themes**

The responses received in this section developed themes regarding the appropriateness of funding that were hinted at during the pilot research study, and provided a wider perspective from college leaders. There was a strong belief that bespoke skills and training devised in consultation directly between the employer and the college of further education provided more appropriate and relevant business results than funded qualifications. This suggested that the products were less effective and therefore less likely to contribute towards business effectiveness when proscribed at a national rather than a local level.

However, knowing this, and despite the belief that they steered training towards business-competitive solutions, respondents still delivered a lot of training in order to maximise government or agency funding rather than obtain funding from the employer. This was interesting and telling on several fronts:

Firstly, it suggested a focus for colleges on delivering *easy* rather than the *most relevant* training to employers, simply because the funding was available and therefore it was a simpler ‘sale’ to make. This was a concern; because it was happening despite the feeling by those recommending it that it was less appropriate and effective. It appeared to be an approach that lacked belief (or perhaps the ability) of having a business-focussed engagement team that could communicate effectively with employers and always secure the most effective skills training.

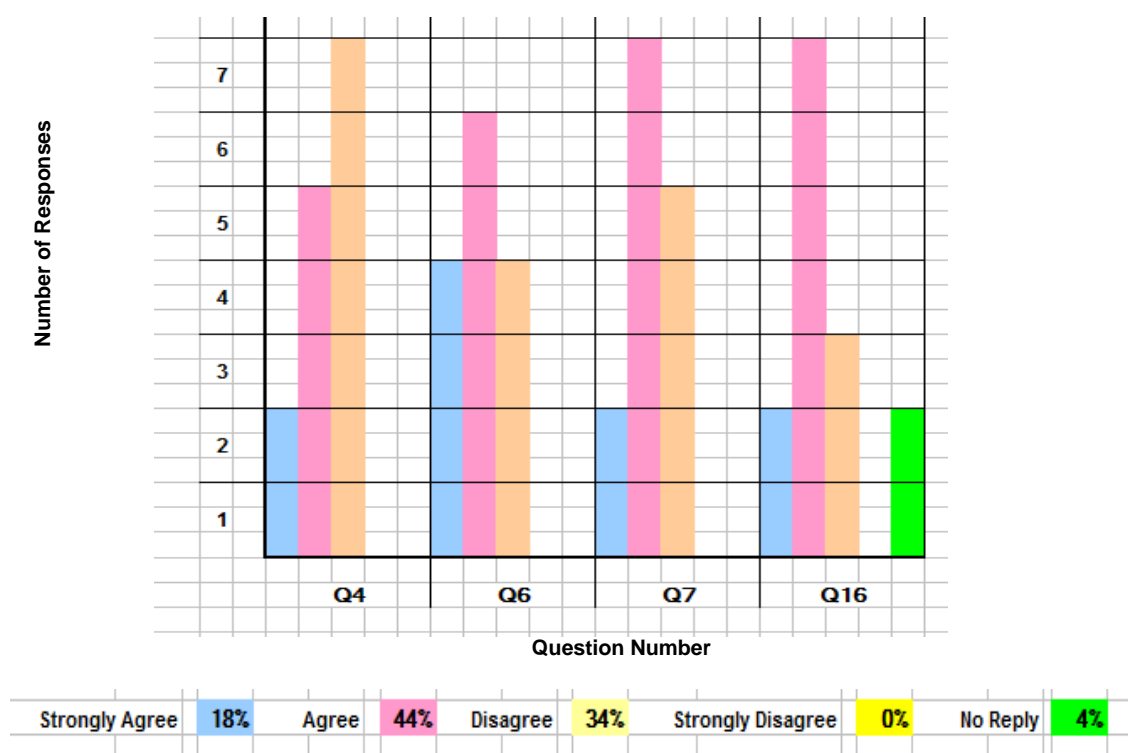
Secondly, and this is directly related to the previous point, employers appeared not to understand the true business value of the most effective and appropriate skills and training. This resulted in choosing training that was *free* or *funded* rather than of *most benefit*. This suggested a communications failure on the part of all parties involved. There was also a related theme borne out of the response suggesting a college-first approach which placed the lack of understanding of the value of effective training as the responsibility of the employer rather than the college.

Thirdly, it would suggest the need for a review of *why* the significant funding available for developing businesses was directed towards skills and training that, in the opinions of the professionals delivering it, was less effective than it could be. If true, perhaps this related to a lack of understanding on the part of those funding qualifications of the true impact relevant skills and training could make. Alternatively, it may not be a lack of understanding; rather a way value for money is measured. In other words, it could be easier to measure numbers of qualifications and progressions to higher levels as a value for money invested, rather than devising for example, an economic measure, or business growth/survival model, or other form of impact measure.

From a products perspective, this consideration of the impact and effectiveness of qualifications generated the most responses; which suggested a strong area of feeling amongst college leaders, and an area that could benefit from wider investigation.



## Delivery – summary of research



**Table 25**  
**Quantitative comparison of delivery responses**

**Table 25** brings together the relative weightings of responses. All weightings had four scales to choose from, ranging from *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree*. No questions were compulsory and respondents could also choose not to reply. Analysis of the chart shows a slightly higher percentage in strong agreement/agreement with the questions (62%) than disagreement/strong disagreement (34%). 4% of responses did not receive a reply.

As outlined in **Model D**, the delivery phase theoretically follows on from effective product development, dialogue and consultation. The reality from respondents so far revealed, at best, a mixed approach to the development and dialogue, resulting in an offer that, in their opinions, may not be the most effective in terms of providing business competitiveness. Many respondents did feel that FE colleges had a significant and

important responsibility for ensuring their offer contributed to economic effectiveness, but there was an acknowledgement that the funding they are provided with did not always make sufficient resources available to do so. Not all agreed; some believed responsible colleges “should take ownership” and do research to support their curriculum. Those who took this approach to aligning their curriculum utilised a variety of methods, including an analysis of environmental scanning, market research, collaboration and responsiveness towards job and business opportunities. Colleges, it was suggested, should “also be mindful of relevant skills strategies and LEP priorities.” One respondent agreed with this viewpoint regarding a strong awareness and understanding of business needs, particularly as, for most colleges, “employer work represents a significant part of their offer.” The respondent suggested that, without an awareness of business needs, in a progressing and demanding market place, unresponsive colleges “will not maintain or grow their market share.”

It was reported earlier that respondents believed responsible FE colleges should align their curriculum strategies with skills needs, as well as job and business opportunities. Considering the mixed practice in FE college and employer dialogue, a question was asked as to how leaders communicated with businesses in order to find out what they thought about the training and services provided. “In most cases”, one respondent replied, “regular meetings and ongoing communication”, although they also used a wide variety of other methods, such as business forums, surveys and events. At this respondent’s college all the business team were senior managers, so that employers’ “requirements can be put into practice very quickly.” Surveys appeared to be a popular way of obtaining business feedback, with five out of six respondents to this question stating a survey as at least one of their methods. Other methods included focus groups, relationship and sales management, some one-to-one discussions, as well as course feedback.

Having heard that there was mixed practice and opinions regarding dialogue, product development and curriculum alignment, could respondents consider why FE colleges should provide delivery of skills and training to local businesses? One respondent felt that FE colleges were strongly placed to provide support to local businesses. The respondent felt that colleges combined “economies of scale and a broad remit to ensure that local and regional skills needs are addressed in a cohesive way. With extensive coverage throughout the UK this provides a known and accessible college network.” This feeling was supported by other respondents. It was suggested that part of the role of an FE college was to be there to deliver support for “local needs including economic needs.” Colleges, a further respondent noted were “best placed to provide education and skills”, across a wide range of subjects and levels from pre-entry to higher education. This wide range of support, it was felt, was complemented by colleges having access to “the best resources – physical and human – to develop skills.”

Are FE colleges best placed to deliver the most effective service to employers? Some respondents believed so; one suggesting this was because of “the diverse offer, range, levels and value for money” that FE colleges provided. There was a small minority who believed that private training providers were more effective, and a broader mix who reflected that FE colleges, universities and private training providers all had “an important part to play and indeed do so.” Some colleges were “still trying to achieve” an organisation-wide approach to responding to employer needs. As one respondent noted, the department responsible for responding to business needs had “an organised approach but I couldn’t say it was college wide.” A further respondent agreed, reflecting that as far as an organisation-wide approach went, it was inconsistent and “not enough.”

The context of FE colleges providing support not just to local businesses but also towards the local economy was stressed by respondents in response to the question of why FE colleges should provide skills and training to local businesses. This contribution to the local economy would, it was suggested, ideally attract more business to the local area. “Colleges have an important role to play in supporting the local economy”, a further respondent considered, “ensuring that local individuals find meaningful employment.” One respondent was more direct; pointing out that the FE college is “a key stakeholder in the local economy. Local success will support our success.”

### **Delivery – summary of themes**

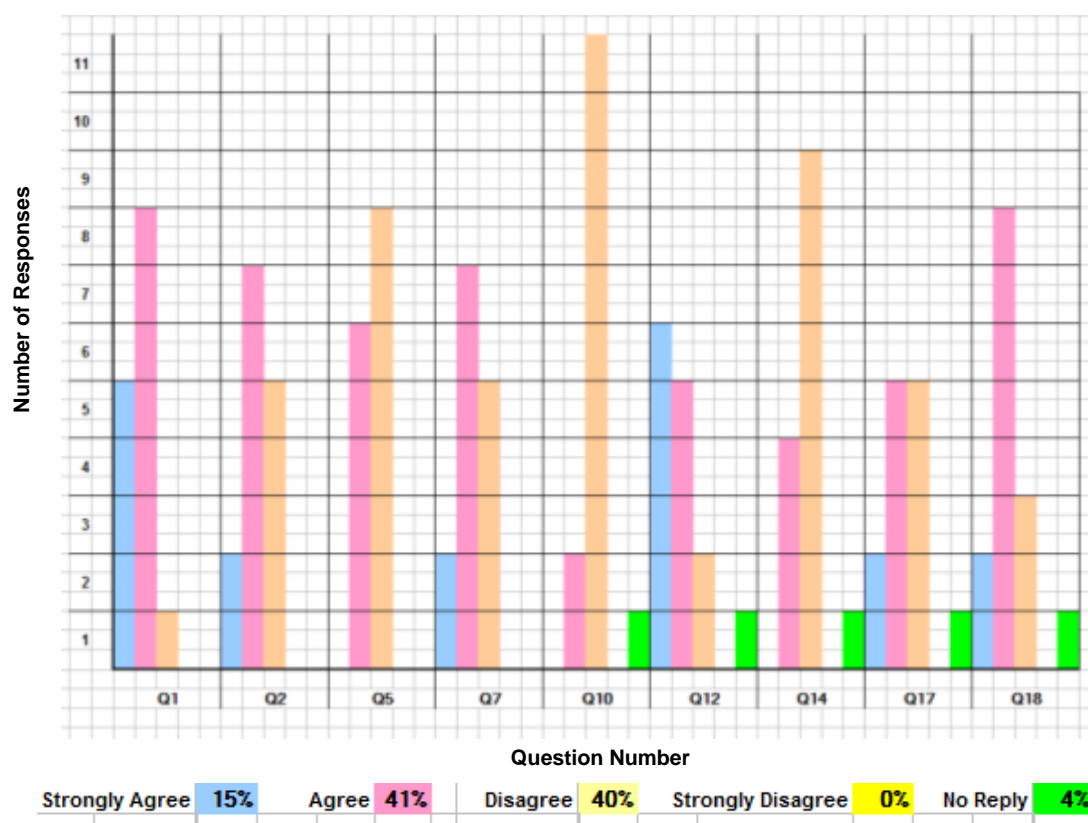
This section was weaker than the others, partly because of the considerable overlap of questions with other sections and a desire to add to perceptions rather than to repeat messages already covered. It was also lighter than it could have been, as, on reflection, more could have been done to delve into the methods and specific examples leaders used to determine modes of delivery and promote the availability of their offer. The information that has been uncovered however is of value and does help develop the picture of FE college leaders’ perceptions of the value they add to businesses.

From the responses received, college leaders did understand and believe in the importance of providing needs-based (either employer or labour market-driven) provision and service responsiveness. There was some mixed practice as to how much time each provider allocated to this; ranging from very little due to a reported lack of funding resources, to those who took greater ownership of this responsibility. There was also an acknowledgement and agreement regarding the economic and community-related role FE colleges made to their localities and a belief that strong connections in these relationships would provide for mutual benefits.

As with the pilot research, more than one respondent acknowledged that they did not have an organisation-wide approach to business liaison and responsiveness. There was recognition that this was important, but often inconsistent and not enough.

It would have been useful to have received stronger evidence of commitment or more detailed examples of the FE college approaches to receiving feedback from employers. The slight responses and evidence received, particularly the wider approach of conducting surveys rather than receiving closer employer feedback, suggested more emphasis could be provided from FE colleges to truly understand the difference made. However, the summary in the next section on *Impact* may provide more answers to this question.

### Impact – summary of research



**Table 26**  
**Quantitative comparison of impact responses**

The purpose of this research is to understand the impact leaders of colleges of further education in England believe their organisations contribute towards business competitiveness. As such, this final section looked at responses from FE leaders to impact-related questions. **Table 26** brings together the relative weightings of responses. All weightings had four scales to choose from, ranging from *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree*. No questions were compulsory and respondents could also choose not to reply. Analysis of the chart shows a slightly higher percentage in strong agreement/agreement with the questions (56%) than disagreement/strong disagreement (40%). 4% of responses did not receive a reply.

Despite 84% of respondents disagreeing that government funding for business training was focussed on business competitiveness, only one respondent disagreed that FE colleges contributed towards business competitiveness through the business training and development they provided. The reason for the negativity appeared to be aligned to the belief of college leaders that nationally recognised qualifications were not the most effective way of making a business more competitive. “Unaccredited training and skills has an important role to play” was the feeling of one respondent; not all nationally recognised qualifications were sufficiently up-to-date to deliver competitive skills, was the feeling of another. One respondent who disagreed that qualifications were the most effective way to make a positive impact upon business competitiveness suggested that other factors such as strategic marketing, design for manufacture, and performance management could “arguably have more instant impact.”

Within this context, which was very much qualification-driven, it was interesting to note the belief that college leaders did feel they provided increased competitiveness to businesses through the training they provided. One respondent agreed they did, reflecting that “the sector generally has a good track record I believe.” A further respondent who agreed that FE colleges made a positive impact felt that employers

“need to make the time investment to help apply the training to their needs and keep an overview of the content so that this can be reinforced and help improve company performance.” A more general comment, in line with the mixed responses received generally to most questions, suggested that some “providers and sectors will achieve more impact than others.”

Respondents had mixed views on whether employers saw them as the first choice for training and development. One respondent who did noted that they had “strong partnerships as do other providers in the region.” On the negative side, one leader reflected that competition was “fierce and many employers will look for the best deal and will not necessarily have any allegiances.”

There were examples in support of respondents’ answers where they could evidence how their college had directly made a positive impact upon business competitiveness. One college had run a subsidised apprenticeship initiative with a local council which had provided many small/medium-sized businesses with “trainees that have had a direct impact on their skills development and capacity.” One had collected examples of positive impact through the (now lapsed) government-supported Training Quality Standard (TQS) process. A further respondent had done the same, and had produced “sample case studies” as a result, but admitted that these had now “reduced since the demise of TQS.” These case studies and examples were used by a further respondent “to publicise the provision we offer.” Case studies appeared to be a popular way for FE colleges to celebrate and share their examples with others; one college cited that a recent case study of theirs had been published by a National Skills Academy. One respondent admitted that they did not have examples of positive impact in all cases, but did where they were easy to measure the impact; for example where they delivered Business Improvement Techniques.

Did FE leaders' colleges measure the impact their training offer had upon business competitiveness? Over 80% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that they actively sought feedback; however evidence to support this was noticeably slight. Only one respondent provided evidence; that they collected feedback via "survey, course evaluation, employer clubs." Nearly two thirds of respondents believed their colleges measured the impact their training had upon business competitiveness; however embedded impact measures and strong examples proved difficult to substantiate this assertion. When evidence of impact was pursued, one respondent said they did measure this "but could and should improve this area." This was supported by another college leader, who evidenced their impact through case studies "gathered from employers which identify improvements that have been made as a result of training", but who reflected that "however, this is not consistent." One college leader who disagreed that their college measured the business impact of their training admitted that "our evidence is anecdotal" and that they did not have a universal approach to measuring the impact.

Comparing the belief of leaders that they measured impact with the examples provided, perhaps it would be beneficial to the sector for there to be a national measure of the impact FE makes towards business competitiveness? When questioned on this issue, a mixed balance of responses was provided. On the negative side, one respondent dismissed the idea as having "no benefit." Another response reflected:

"I can see a benefit in a national approach to impact assessment within an agreed and recognised framework, however the danger is this becomes so broad to cover everything that it becomes meaningless. Also, metrics are in danger of becoming misleading and of little value. I see greater benefit in colleges undertaking activity themselves and building upon employer testimony and support."



This balanced reflection was supported by a further respondent who suggested that a national impact measure “would provide a snapshot of impact”; but that they were not sure it would affect the decision-making of local employers. There were respondents who did see a potential benefit. “It would raise the profile of FE with business nationally”, was one leaders’ opinion. They suggested the measure could influence funding; “The measure should be business impact but then funding should support programmes which the employer feels can best support this in their company. Funding should be sufficient to cover delivery and contract management.” A further respondent could see the positives of a national impact measurement and the potentially raised profile of FE, noting that there could be “increased confidence in what we do and are able to do.” They suggested that one way of measuring impact nationally could be looking at predicted skills gaps against the contribution FE made through providing numbers of skilled achievers.

### **Impact – summary of themes**

The responses to this theme were interesting. There appeared to be a contradiction between a desire and belief from respondents that they did measure and make an impact upon business competitiveness and real, substantiating evidence or examples of consistent practices to support this.

Responses received suggested that, despite a belief that government funding was not focussed on supporting business competitiveness; the majority of colleges were able to deliver an impact upon business competitiveness. The belief behind this reasoning was that state funding was predominantly focussed on qualifications as a measure, whereas college leaders did not feel that qualifications were the most effective way to improve business competitiveness; other, non-state funded routes had greater impact. Without evidence that the only impact came from bespoke provision paid for by

employers, this did seem to indicate either a contradiction of beliefs or a need for more evidence.

Inconsistency across respondents was recognised when it came to evidencing the impact their colleges made towards business competitiveness. Responses suggested that the importance of this measure and the time allocated to considering it was very much left to individual colleges to determine. The evidence suggested a belief-based rather than proof-based consideration of organisational impact. Mixed responses were received regarding the idea of introducing a consistent, national measure of college impact upon business competitiveness. Some respondents believed that there would be little to no impact; others saw potential. There appeared to be some benefit, particularly towards supporting an increased positive FE profile perspective. Potentially, metrics could also be determined to aid funding, which could be of benefit to all parties involved, not only in raising confidence as one respondent suggested, but also in improving dialogue between colleges, government and employers.

### **Reflections on the wider research**

The themes of *Dialogue*, *Products*, *Delivery* and *Impact* considered within this research have been based on a theoretical model derived from an analysis of organisational theory and focussed on an original study of FE leaders' beliefs. The study investigated the impact leaders of FE colleges in England believed their organisations made towards business competitiveness.

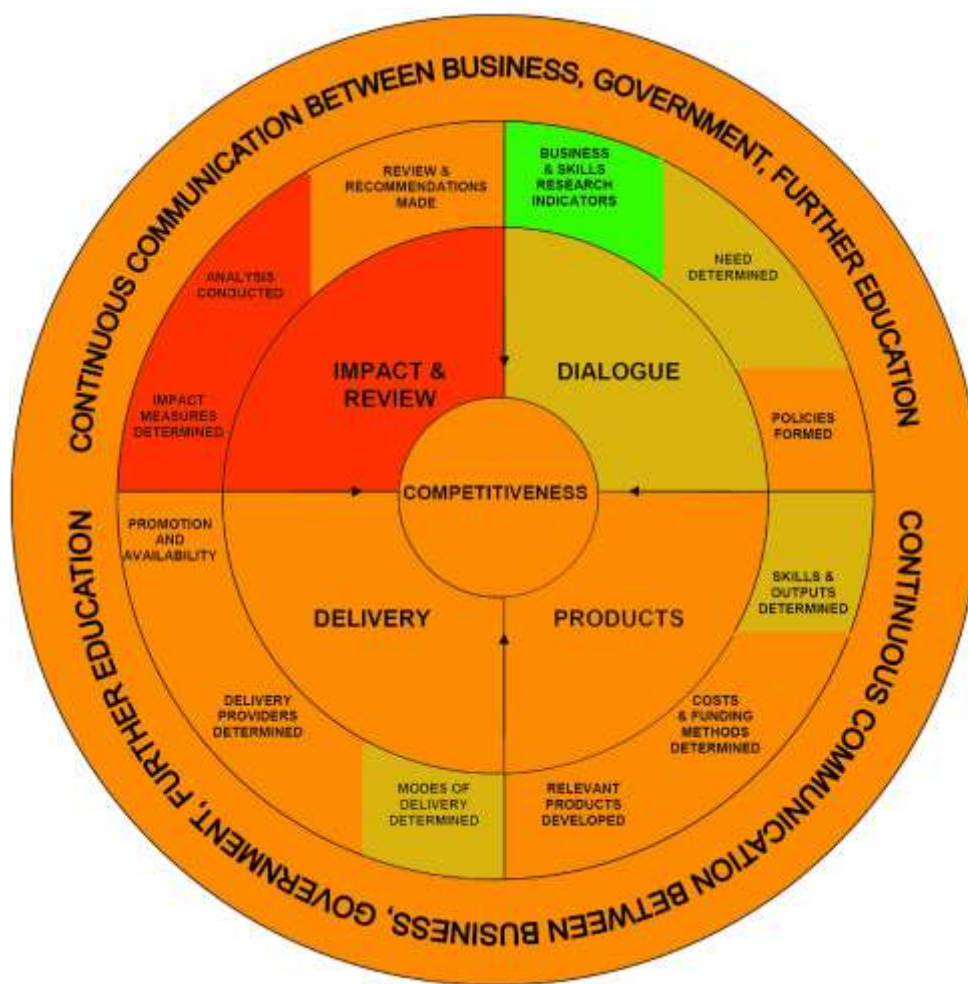
An analysis of a pilot study conducted in 2012 led to a refined and wider study in 2013. The findings from this research are summarised here. These are summarised from FE leaders' responses and perceptions and represent the themes uncovered.

- Businesses have preconceived ideas of further education colleges and the perceived benefits that can add to their business competitiveness.
- Businesses have a lack of understanding of what FE can provide, as well as the nature of the funding FE colleges receive, and want provision at little or no cost.
- Employers appear not to understand the true business value of the most effective and appropriate skills and training. This poor communication results in employers choosing and colleges offering training that is *free* or *funded*, rather than of *most benefit*.
- Poor communication between FE colleges and employers also means businesses have a lack of understanding of what the benefits could be, and this results in less satisfaction for businesses.
- FE colleges display a lack of an organisation-wide approach to business responsiveness, tending to have a business-department-led, rather than an organisation-wide-led approach, which can lead to an inconsistent approach to employer liaison and responsiveness.
- FE leaders are responsive in a forever changing environment, but continual changes from the government are destabilising.
- Continuous change results in uncertainty regarding the perception the government has of the sector.
- The FE sector needs to do more to engage in dialogue with businesses and the government and policy makers
- Bespoke skills and training devised locally in consultation directly between the employer and a college of further education provides more appropriate and relevant business results than nationally proscribed funded qualifications.
- Respondents deliver training that maximises the governmental or agency funding, rather than deriving their main funding from the employer. This

suggests a focus for colleges on delivering *funded* rather than the *most relevant* training to employers.

- College leaders understand and believe in the importance of providing needs-based provision and service responsiveness, as they have an important role and part to play in supporting a successful local economy. There is mixed practice as to how much time each provider allocates to this and the evidence to support it is weak.
- There is lack of evidence of FE college approaches to receiving employer feedback. It is a belief-based rather than proof-based consideration of organisational impact. More emphasis on obtaining evidence could be provided from FE colleges to truly understand the business competitiveness impact.
- There is mixed response regarding the idea of a consistent, national measure of college impact on business competitiveness. There appeared to be some potential benefit, for example; supporting a positive FE profile perspective, or devising metrics to determine funding. This could support raised confidence in the sector, and/or improve dialogue between colleges, government and employers.

**Model E** illustrates how the responses and evidence identified from the wider research have been mapped onto the theoretical **Model D**, which was used as the basis for determining the revised research questions. The colours range from green (good practice and strong evidence), through amber (mixed practice and some evidence) to red (poor practice and weak/no evidence). Degrees of colour have been used where some overlap exists. **Table 27** provides more detail regarding how these conclusions have been drawn. A couple of areas of detail have been italicised indicating areas where improved questioning could have gathered stronger evidence or feedback from respondents. Overall, the impact on competitiveness suggested by the feedback is one of mixed practice for the sector.



### Model E

*Theoretical flow for FE skills delivery leading to business competitiveness with research responses colour-overlaid*

#### Key to colours used

- Good practice and strong evidence
- Between Good and Mixed
- Mixed practice and/or evidence
- Between Mixed and Poor
- Poor practice and weak/no evidence

#### OVERALL IMPACT ON BUSINESS COMPETITIVENESS



Nature of Practice	Topic	Evidence Summary
Good	Business and Skills Research Indicators	Wide range of skills strategies, LEP priorities, SSC recommendations, college local indicators, market research that highlight business skills need; FE college contribution towards local economy.
Good - Mixed	Need Determined	FE college departments responsive to business need; need not always the driver – funding or qualifications have a bearing; responsible colleges identify need; mixed practice.
Good - Mixed	Skills and Outputs Determined	Strong on meeting legislative requirements; skills and training often determined as well as qualifications.
Good - Mixed	Modes of Delivery Determined	Regular meetings between FE colleges and employers; employers' requirements can be put into practice quickly; <b>lack of specific detail from questions for definitive conclusion.</b>
Good - Mixed	Dialogue	Dialogue exists, could be more effective; suggestion of too many bodies; the profile of FE within the discussions needs to be raised.
Mixed	Policies Formed	Policies of change without impact; FE colleges not always consulted/opinions valued when determining policies.
Mixed	Costs and Funding Methods Determined	Funding not perceived to be focussed on business competitiveness; sometimes an alignment, sometimes funding-chasing.
Mixed	Relevant Products Developed	Mixed practice – some colleges invest development time, others only if funding allows.
Mixed	Products	Mixed – funding as often as business need determines products offered, despite perception of funding driving outdated or less relevant products.
Mixed	Delivery Providers Determined	Variable – some excellent partnerships, mixed perceptions of the value of FE.
Mixed	Promotion and Availability	Businesses have a poor understanding of benefits FE colleges can provide; relationships important; competition fierce; <b>lack of specific promotional evidence from questions for further detail.</b>
Mixed	Delivery	FE colleges responsive; lack of organisational-wide approach; good access to resources; benefits of FE colleges not effectively communicated; relationships important.
Mixed	Review and Recommendations Made	Considerable change and policies introduced; lack of consistent impact measures – difficult to determine effectiveness and make recommendations; qualifications used as basis for much recommendation; some colleges review, others do not; considerable number of bodies make recommendations.
Mixed	Continuous Communication between Business, Government, FE	Significant communications between bodies take place; value of FE colleges not perceived to always be considered or effectively communicated; FE college could improve communication of their benefits to business; local communications result in effective bespoke skills and training for employers; feedback following delivery of training could be improved.
Mixed	Competitiveness	Taking all areas into account, evidence of a service that meets business need is provided, but could be improved. Key areas that could improve competitiveness emerge as: more effective communication, funding and products focussed on need, an organisational rather than departmental approach to meeting business need, a desire and commitment to measuring impact and effectiveness.
Mixed - Poor	Impact Measures Determined	Mixed practice and little evidence. TQS did necessitate impact measures, has now lapsed.
Mixed - Poor	Analysis Conducted	Inconsistent; anecdotal and belief-based rather than consistent approach.
Mixed - Poor	Impact and Review	Little evidence of actual and consistent understanding of impact and response/change made as a result; policies of change without impact.
Poor		No areas examined were considered to be completely poor.

**Table 27**  
**Summary of evidence for determining nature of practice**

There are some areas within the topics researched that evidence good or close to good practice, but these are felt to be few in number. Although no items have been identified as poor, the area of *Impact and Review* does come close, due to very little supporting evidence of either individual college analysis or national measures. From the overall evidence to date, the impact FE college leaders believed they make on business competitiveness is mixed at best and certainly provides a considerable number of areas for improvement.

Earlier in this chapter there was a reflection on the research method that had been used and was proposed to be used for conducting the wider research. It discussed the fact that the reflection time the pilot research offered allowed for the opportunity to have method changes to the full research implemented. One of the changes built into the research stage was the possibility of a follow-up with some of the respondents, should issues be uncovered that could require more detail or clarification. This dialogue will be pursued in the next chapter.

## Chapter 6 – Analysis of Interviews

Following analysis of the pilot research feedback, additional research was undertaken, focussed around the emerging themes and findings. This analysis has formed the basis for follow up face to face dialogue with some of the respondents. It was anticipated that through direct discussion, further richness and detail would be added to the themes that have emerged from the research. The face to face research would also allow for the opportunity to address the question and response areas italicised in **Table 27** that were considered to be weak or had potential to provide more detail.

As emerging themes have already been uncovered and analysed, the interviews themselves would require planning in order to make sure the appropriate areas for discussion were covered but also allow for the respondent to discuss issues of importance to themselves. This would build on recommendations from the research theory and also allow for flexibility within the interview, the opportunity to provide the interviewee with a considerable amount of leeway, whilst at the same time providing the interviewer with fairly specific topics to be covered (Bryman, 2012, p.471). This research approach, often referred to in texts as semi-structured interviews, was felt to be appropriate as the content of semi-structured interviews should be “focussed on issues that are central to the research question” (Klenke, 2008, p.127). Having gathered the themes through the research to date, there is now a desire to test the themes and, if possible, “make explicit comparisons between informants” (Baxter and Babbie, 2004, p.330). The semi-structured interview approach is one that will be followed.

The themes and basic outline of the research interviews are outlined in **Table 28**.



**Initial Statement**

*Please note, there is no obligation to participate in this research. You do not have to answer every question and are free to end the interview at any time. All responses will be treated confidentially and published anonymously. Transcripts and records of responses will be stored for educational purposes only. No names, FE establishments or locations will be included in the final report.*

**General introduction and opening question**

*The overall research I'm conducting is looking at the impact FE college leaders believe their organisations contribute towards business competitiveness. I've been working on it for several years and have some themes that have emerged I'd like to discuss. Before we get into the specifics though, I wondered if you'd mind telling me a bit about your approach to working with businesses and the thoughts you have on the impact this makes?*

**More specific questions focussed on the themes from research findings**

*Thank you. The research findings have been compiled from responses from leaders across the country, and are showing several indications. I'd appreciate your thoughts and opinions on these if that's okay:*

- Businesses appear to have a lack of understanding of what FE colleges can provide
- They seem to have preconceived ideas of further education colleges
- Do you think communication is effective? Do you think employers are aware of the different modes of delivery available to them? Do you know which types of promotional activity works best?
- Employers appear not to understand the true business value of the most effective and appropriate skills and training. Do you think they understand the benefits your college can provide them with?
- They appear to not be aware of how a college receives its funding and want provision at little or no cost.
- Employers appear to choose, and colleges seem to offer training that is *free* or *funded*, rather than of *most benefit*. Do you feel that there is a tendency for colleges to deliver funded rather than the most relevant training to employers?
- Do you think this could result ultimately in less satisfaction for businesses?

*continued*

- FE colleges seem to have a dedicated business unit that leads employer responsiveness, rather than an organisation-wide-led approach. Do you think this is a fair comment? Would you say your college has an organisation-wide approach to employer responsiveness? Do you think this can lead to an inconsistent approach for employer liaison?
- The research is showing that bespoke skills and training devised locally in consultation directly between an employer and the FE college provides more appropriate and relevant business results than nationally proscribed funded qualifications. How do you feel about that perception?
- Do you feel your provision is predominantly needs driven?
- From the research, FE college approaches to receiving feedback from employers as to the impact their provision makes seems belief-based rather than proof-based. Would this conclusion be fair?
- There is mixed response to the idea of a consistent, national measure of college impact upon business competitiveness. Do you have any strong feelings regarding this?
- From the research, FE leaders appear to be responsive in a forever changing environment, but continual governmental changes seems to be destabilising. Is this something that affects your organisation?
- How do you feel the government perceives further education colleges with regards to employer responsiveness?
- Do you feel the FE sector needs to do more to engage in dialogue in general with businesses, the government and policy makers?

#### **Opportunity for reflection**

*Thank you. Having had this discussion, do you feel there are any areas of research I've referred to that feels at odds with your understanding of the sector?*

*Would you like to add anything or raise any issues that we haven't touched upon?*

*Thank you very much for your time.*

**Table 28**  
**Outline of semi structured interview**

The questions were based upon the findings summarised from FE leaders' responses and perceptions and represent the themes uncovered. Information in the areas of *promotion* and *mode of delivery* that was found to be weak in the findings of the research to date were also included.

**Table 28** outlines the approach taken with the semi-structured interview process. It follows recommended practice (Galletta, 2013, pp.46-52). An initial statement of the purpose of the research interview was made. Participants were informed that the research would be used anonymously and that they could choose not to answer any questions if they wished, or indeed end the interview at any time if they wished. The nature of the interview would be a discussion around the participant's work within the topic being researched and more specific questions regarding the emerging themes that have come out of the interviewer's research process to date. Towards the end, there would be an opportunity for reflection on the discussion, as well as an opportunity for the participant to add anything further.

### **Further analysis – Findings from the semi-structured interviews**

The format of the interviews was trialled prior to interviewing the FE Leaders themselves. The respondent in the trial was neutral, but knowledgeable on the nature of the topic being discussed. This trial process followed recommendations within research theory (Gillham, 2000, p.22; O'Donoghue, 2007, p.133; et al), allowed for a feel and timing for the interview process itself, highlighted the key discussion points and helped to focus the issues.

The trial interview took place on the 16<sup>th</sup> January 2014. Using the areas outlined in **Table 28**, the interview itself took 31 minutes. On the whole, the format and nature of questions worked well, allowing for a broad discussion and a relevant dialogue. A

minor amendment to the outline was made as a result of the trial. At the end, an additional opportunity was added for a general summing up from the respondent on the impact they believe their organisation makes towards business competitiveness. This minor amend can be seen in **Appendix P**.

The semi-structured interviews were carried out between 12 February 2014 and 20 March 2014. Participants chosen were individuals who had previously responded to the research and so had an awareness of the nature of the research topic. Three leaders were interviewed; two from the North West of England and one from the North East of England. One FE college Principal was interviewed who had supported the pilot research. One Deputy Principal was interviewed who had supported the main research. A further FE college Deputy Principal was interviewed who had supported both the pilot and main research studies. To add further depth to the third interview, the Deputy Principal brought an employer with them, in case any employer benefit points could be better supported by the employer directly.

Transcripts of these interviews can be found in **Appendices Q-S**. Where text has been quoted, any references that may reveal the identity of the interviewee or their FE college have been removed. Care has been taken by the researcher when transcribing grammar, sentence construction and intent from the respondents in order to most accurately interpret the responses.

All respondents were thanked for their continued participation and made aware of the nature of anonymity. No questions needed to be answered if respondents did not wish to. Findings from the research undertaken so far were discussed and respondents had the opportunity to comment on the findings and offer their opinions freely. The nature of the interviews was semi-structured to allow for meaningful conversation. The

findings that follow have been grouped where possible around the questions outlined in **Table 28.**

### **The impact FE colleges make upon business competitiveness**

To begin the interview, a broad question was asked, not just to help the dialogue, but to uncover the general beliefs the interviewees held with respect to the research question itself. It was interesting to see whether respondents would feel that FE colleges did make an impact on business competitiveness or effectiveness and if so, how.

“I’m absolutely sure that colleges and this college make an impact”,  
reflected *Interviewee A*,

“but I don’t think that we have sufficient levels of relationships with industry to make the impact that could be made. I think the relationships between us are not as joined up as it should be to make the best impact.”

“I actually think FE’s a very competitive market”,  
considered *Interviewee C*;

“The colleges are competitive; the training providers are very competitive. Generally speaking they value their employer relationships. Now, that’s not widespread right across the sector, particularly in [our region]<sup>24</sup>. There are a lot of good colleges, lots of good providers, so the service that colleges and providers give to employers is generally of a decent standard...”

*Interviewee B* agreed that FE colleges did make an impact. “I think they make a positive impact on businesses. I think you’d expect me to say that.” Interestingly, the response was also tempered, in a similar way to the considerations that the previous

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<sup>24</sup> To respect respondent anonymity, copy in square brackets [ ] has been inserted within this chapter where replies had revealed locations or other references that could reveal their identity.

respondent had made. Impact, the respondent believed, was “probably at different levels...Sometimes we could get a closer relationship, which would add to, in effect, more productivity than we get.”

Did the respondents feel this lack of closeness or connection between FE colleges and businesses was an issue that was unique to their college, or was it perhaps a wider issue?

“I think that’s a sector thing,”

*Interviewee B* considered,

“because I think we’re very much driven by qualifications and funding rather than what the needs of the employer are and I think if we looked more about ‘what were they really saying’? and fleshed out what they wanted and said ‘well that’s how much it costs’, we might be able to get that better. At the moment I think we’re driven by getting the qualification through and the money through our main contracts and that then stops us, or blinkers people in what they’re looking at.”

*Interviewee A* felt that this relationship distance between FE colleges and employers was a lack of understanding of each other, not just from a needs perspective,

“because I think industry and businesses always sort of criticise skills providers for not understanding their needs, but they don’t articulate them very well. But I also think it’s equally, they fail to try to understand the parameters in which we’re working, because I think education providers would be really willing to help them understand that so that we can meet their needs better. But we’re very cautious about trying to sort of give them more things to think about, so we try to do it at a surface level.”

This cautious, or reluctant nature on behalf of colleges to enter a full and close relationship or dialogue with employers was, it seemed to *Interviewee A*, limiting the range and therefore the level of impact FE colleges could make upon business

effectiveness. Rather than just say “well we have this, is it any good?” to employers, this respondent believed a deeper understanding of “what *is* available and how you could exploit that from the business perspective” would truly make a positive difference.

Whereas *Interviewee A* believed this distance partly stemmed from reluctance for FE colleges to overwhelm businesses with too much information, *Interviewee B* felt it was the way colleges were driven to act by their funding contracts.

“I think it’s partly the way we’re programmed that we think about fulfilling our contracts; often the reason we’ve come is to do that. But I think there is also that we don’t have the aspiration that we would do that commercially, because we’ve also got our roots in what is going on in the community and doing things for nothing; we don’t think like that. So I think if we thought differently about it we might get different work.”

This was an interesting perspective; the consideration that college leaders are driven by the nature of their contracts to deliver those contracts which does not necessarily result in a commercially-driven offer or indeed a need to generate commercial income. Did the response imply that there was a mismatch between funding and employer requirements?

Considering this point, *Interviewee B* reflected on the role of the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) in determining and recommending the employer-led qualifications. The respondent questioned whether the SSCs really “know what industry needs.” There was a suggestion that the current funded offer, whilst not necessarily being considered a mismatch, should at least consider “whether we’ve got that flexibility” in being able to respond to what employers need.

*Interviewee C* believed that growth, certainly with apprenticeships, was currently being driven by the education and training sector. The respondent considered the funding route from an apprenticeship perspective;

“because colleges are incentivised to hit their funding contracts, they will work tirelessly to engage employers. There’s a lot of evidence to suggest that a percentage of it, and I don’t know what that is, is actually driving the apprenticeship market. And that’s not poor quality apprenticeships; that could be high quality provision, high quality training, high quality job outcomes.”

An interesting point was raised by *Interviewee A*, who noted that as a sector FE tends “to be all things to all people” and as a result could sometimes be spreading its resources thinly; or at the very least needing to make individual decisions as to how it prioritises those resources. Perhaps it was not the nature of funding driving the delivery, rather than that of time? If an FE response for employers required a specific needs-driven approach that was not necessarily already funded, or endorsed by an SSC or other body, then it would require time to reflect on and develop. This then would necessitate a greater resource investment on the part of an FE college. “I think”, reflected the respondent on the prioritisation of resources and, with no criticism intended, noted that “colleges have to make decisions where they put their focus and whether or not they can afford to give a lot of time to certain elements of the curriculum.” The respondent continued; “some colleges that haven’t given enough attention to employer-facing type of things are probably the ones that don’t have the relationships with the employers where it is really consultative and collaborative.”

This thought was interesting, as it moved the perspective of the relationship and provision FE colleges had for employers from a funding and contract-driven one to one of choice on the part of FE college leaders. When it came to the proscribed funding-driven provision that FE colleges had to offer, *Interviewee A* suggested that “the big



companies will be the ones who contribute to the qualification frameworks and what's in the qualifications." These qualifications might be appropriate for the large companies but, the respondent reflected, they do not necessarily work for the smaller organisations even though "that's what's funded." This could be where the decision regarding investment of time and other resources to develop the offer beyond what is already available was down to the importance each individual college leader placed on the priority of their organisational relationship with employers. If provision was not already available, then time needed to be invested, with the funding coming through a full-cost commercial route, or perhaps through developing flexibilities within the available funding provision through negotiation with the funding providers. *Interviewee A* believed that;

"only the **best** colleges use the full opportunities that the flexibility of the qualifications gives. But again, that's all down to cost of doing that. There is an extra cost if you are really, really flexible with your offer, because you've got to have more skills in your workforce to offer the full range of flexibility and opportunity that the qualifications offer."

### **Communication between FE colleges and government**

The nature of communication and perception between government, FE colleges and employers was beginning to be felt as an undercurrent within interviewees' responses. Was communication an issue underlying FE college leaders' response to developing its relationships and offer with businesses? The evidence gathered to date certainly showed mixed practice when it came to effective three-way communications and partial effectiveness when it came to effective dialogue.

Considering the communication between the government and FE providers first, *Interviewee C's* opinion was that "it's probably at an all time low." The respondent felt

that “there’s no evidence at all that the government are listening to the views of FE and even some of the wider training providers.”

*Interviewee B* had “concerns whether government really think through some of their policies and look at the implications,” suggesting that the decision to reduce the funding for 18 year olds studying advanced courses from September 2014<sup>25</sup> “might have been one of those.” The Train to Gain initiative was another example cited by this respondent, who “never liked the fact that it was free.” As an illustration, the respondent highlighted how, before that initiative, they had been offering Team Leading provision commercially to employers. However, once it was introduced that commercial funding was lost as the provision could be provided free under Train to Gain<sup>26</sup>, resulting in, in their opinion, an unnecessary waste of government money. The consideration from this respondent was that closer communications could support stronger policies and decisions and prevent this sort of waste by drawing on FE leaders’ knowledge and experience; “I do think there is a sort of practicality of what needs to be done and how it will work and that if there was a better dialogue, that could be explored at an earlier stage.”

*Interviewee A* suggested that there were two possible levels to the dialogue. The first is “right at the BIS level, from the political side and how government and funders and politicians at the highest level discuss things.” The respondent believed that the individuals involved here were “so far removed from how it works on the ground that they’re not effective in having those discussions.”

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<sup>25</sup> See (Mucklow, 2013, online). Online 13 April 2014 at: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/264707/Peter\\_Mucklow\\_Letter\\_to\\_sector\\_December\\_13.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/264707/Peter_Mucklow_Letter_to_sector_December_13.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Train to Gain was a government initiative that was aimed at providing flexible, often free, training to meet the needs of employers. See, for example, (NAO, BIS and LSC, 2009, pp.4-35).

The second level of dialogue was very much perceived to be at an operational level;

“And at the operational level I think there are so many...what’s the word...I don’t want to say, make it sound negative, but I think businesses are running to stand still; FE providers are running to stand still and I think everybody’s just trying to get the quickest win together, rather than fostering longer-term collaborative relationships.”

*Interviewee B* echoed the fact that;

“there are different types of dialogue really. There’s the dialogue to be very specific on training and then there’s the dialogue looking perhaps a bit further into the future about what’s going on and how it will all work.”

The respondent believed that dialogue was short-term focussed. For training-specific dialogue, there was a reasonable level of dialogue that took place, as reflected within the research findings model to date. However, they had doubts about the effectiveness of the wider dialogue, suggesting that “the more strategic view of what we’re doing and how it all works, how we’re planning for the future, doesn’t happen.”

There was a negative picture from all respondents regarding communications and dialogue between government and FE colleges, particularly when it came to policies and decision-making. *Interviewee C* believed that this had a negative impact for all, particularly within the FE college sector. The respondent reflected that this halted the sector’s ability to plan and develop as “the problem that I think I find in FE is it’s just reacting to government policy all the time.” As an example of, in their opinion unnecessary change and a lack of consistency, they highlighted that

“at the moment apprenticeships are changing. Apprenticeships are just becoming understood by employers and now they’re changing again, almost at a whim of different ministers. And yet I think the best

understood and best respected apprenticeship system is the German system, which has only changed twice in fifty years. So I would certainly think a bit more consistency could help in that respect.”

There was a perceived lack of strategic consideration within the policy-making process, as a number of responses reflected on the short-term, almost knee-jerk planning and introduction of policies. *Interviewee B* believed that to support effective planning and progress within the sector, a considered and appropriate “discussion of those things would help.” The respondent was concerned;

“because there seems to be a change with every government rather than long-term planning, and that would help if we knew with a bit of certainty that things were going to be successful. So, we’ve got the Review of Apprenticeships<sup>27</sup> at the moment and the concern of how employers might tackle that situation (being responsible for the money and what will happen). And so I think that it would be useful to know that over a longer period of time, although I accept what I’m saying may not be realistic, given that governments might change every four years.”

*Interviewee C* had similar concerns and believed that colleges, through the Association of Colleges (AoC) had the right body in place to support effective dialogue. “I think from a national point of view”, the respondent considered, “government must take notice of the likes of the AoC who speak on behalf of the entire FE network, who are very well researched; if they need to gather information, colleges respond very quickly.” The respondent stressed that in their opinion it was “just so important that they listen to that voice”, as there was a feeling that the voice of FE was consistently either not being heard, or just ignored. The interviewee reflected the sentiments of the previous

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<sup>27</sup> See (BIS and DfE, 2013, pp.4-24).

respondent and noted that “there’s lots of good practice; you know, the skills system in this country isn’t broke. If anything, it needs consistency.”

In echoes of *Interviewee B*’s proposal for decisions to be made over longer periods of time rather than just between elections, *Interviewee C* highlighted the latest changes to apprenticeship delivery. The respondent wondered whether the sector “needs maybe a cross-party agreement to say ‘well, you know we’ll stick at this for the next ten years’ rather than change apprenticeship frameworks every three years; almost at the whim of a Minister for Skills.”

*Interviewee A* believed that the government currently saw “more weaknesses than strengths” within the FE college sector. “I’m sure that they could identify real good practice and I think they do recognise that”, the respondent reflected, suggesting that when the government did see good practice “they use that to build their models of how they want to move forward.” However, for the sector as a whole, this respondent believed that the government saw “too many colleges that have few of those strengths.”

Within *Interviewee C*’s reflection on the forthcoming changes to apprenticeship frameworks, there was a belief that the changes being made by the government, particularly the re-direction of funding from colleges to employers themselves, were heavily weighted towards supporting larger organisations. This, the respondent felt, was “dangerous for a lot of companies. The big companies will survive, they’ll cope, they’ll adapt, but for a lot of companies, particularly the small micro businesses, it’s going to seriously hamper them, the amount of apprenticeships they take.” The respondent wondered whether the redirected funding would become diluted by employers who did wish to access it, through needing to create more administrative or training systems in order to support it. The respondent described the proposed

changes as “whims” and “noise” that could unfortunately “have a big impact on a lot of colleges.”

*Interviewee A* was also concerned with the balance of needs and capacity between large and small businesses. They illustrated how needs were so different between large and smaller companies and that;

“larger companies have a lot more capacity to be more flexible, to have more dialogue, to invest more in the skills of the workforce. And SMEs have very little room for manoeuvre and tend to have to take what’s on offer, and that’s a shame because how do they ever get away from being an SME? How do you get them to be a larger company? Do you know what I mean? It’s almost like they’re doomed to stay where they are.”

The respondent did feel there was a danger sometimes that policies and initiatives were created through dialogue with large employers and that the voice of the small business could often be one that was lost or ignored. “There is a point,” the respondent reflected,

“It sort of gets lost among all of the other things, but it is important, isn’t it, that you don’t forget there are the needs of the smaller companies. I do feel really sorry for the people who are trying to run a small business on their own with maybe a couple of other part-timers or whatever and have to deal with everything.”

“It’s fine for the likes of large companies,” noted *Interviewee C*, “They’ll survive, they’ll move on. The real issue I think is the smaller companies where they don’t have the resource, they don’t necessarily have the appetite to keep going.”

For *Interviewee A*, the development of government policies towards redirecting funding would also create a perception in the minds of employers that FE colleges have not been responsive to employers' needs. The suggested perception was that if the money went directly to employers, they "might be able to do a better job'." The respondent felt that this would not help the relationship between government and FE colleges, but would affect the perceived relationships between employers and the sector. The respondent believed that the government, instead of helping employers by positively championing the FE sector was instead consolidating "negative perceptions" by providing employers with the money directly and asking them to purchase what they want, from where they want. This would then reinforce the perception that colleges were not as responsive as private training providers who can allegedly "do it quicker, faster, better, different." This, for the respondent, would create barriers between FE colleges and employers that, particularly when seemingly endorsed by the government, would become harder to break down.

Communications between FE colleges and the government had been raised earlier in the research and had received varying responses, but certainly with room for improvement. Bearing in mind those conversations, what did respondents believe the government thought of FE colleges? "I think," *Interviewee B* volunteered, that FE was;

"seen as possibly a soft option of where to make cuts, because I think we should probably have a stronger voice and we've got some pretty established networks which we don't seem to use as much as we could."

*Interviewee B* was of the opinion that the government did believe that FE had a value. The fact that the government had set FE colleges the challenge to "get people into jobs" through various adult responsive targets was seen as a "compliment" as well as "quite a scary challenge" but one that showed the

government had faith in the ability of FE colleges to adapt to new initiatives and the changing environment. Considering the challenge, the respondent believed that if the government “didn’t think something of us, they wouldn’t have given us that.”

Also reflecting on job outcomes, *Interviewee C* was of the opinion that it was the individual FE college rather than the FE sector that could make the difference; sometimes with mixed practice even within an individual organisation. The respondent acknowledged *Interviewee B*’s thoughts regarding FE supporting individuals into jobs and was aware of a huge amount of employability training, short courses, some with limited job outcomes. “Conversely, there are also short courses with really good job outcomes. Both of those exist in our college.”

*Interviewee C* was the respondent who believed communications were currently at an all time low and felt that “people like the AoC would give a much more diplomatic answer, because the team there are lobbying all the time. And obviously, they’d be able to properly articulate how much Ministers do listen.” From the respondent’s perspective, particularly regarding the government’s proposed changes to the apprenticeship programme, they believed “right across the sector in FE, the meetings I’ve been to; cluster meetings, there’s a real concern.” What was really needed, this respondent believed was some consistency, maybe through cross-party agreements, and a decision with the current system and policies to “just stick with it. Employers will have more time to understand it.”

*Interviewee B* echoed some of this sentiment; “I think long-term planning would be useful.” The respondent felt that for some time the FE college sector had been in a period “where we’ve got a lot of policies going on and actually it’s not the change of government, as much as the individual, who is Secretary of State.”



## **Communication between FE colleges and employers**

Within the discussions regarding communication, it was important to discover the respondents' opinions regarding the communication between FE and employers and the perception these leaders believed employers and the government had of FE.

*Interviewee C* thought that “generally there’s enough evidence out there to say that employers would value the work done by colleges.” The respondent evidenced their belief that FE colleges added value to businesses;

“I would say that, because it’s so competitive, because colleges are customer-facing, be it for students or employers, and also that the revenue is so important, I would say generally they add value.”

*Interviewee A* believed that over the years the perception from industry towards FE colleges had declined. The respondent cited as an example their belief in the FE college sector’s perceived lack of responsiveness towards businesses. The respondent gloomily believed that some colleges (not all, but enough to create this perception) had, perhaps through a lack of time or understanding, created a downward spiral of response. Rather than develop relationships with employers, these colleges had adopted a ‘take-it-or-leave-it’ approach where they “go out and sell things and employers buy them if they need them and don’t if they don’t.”

This feeling of a lack of skills development through strong relationships and communication with employers was also echoed by *Interviewee B*. During a considered reflection of the emerging research themes, the respondent felt quite strongly that colleges “focus on the delivery and product” rather than effective dialogue and that improvement of the weak dialogue between employers and FE colleges was “probably the most important thing” that needed to be addressed.

There could be a case, *Interviewee B* suggested, for relationship development between employers and FE colleges that “doesn’t need to involve the government.” This would, for those FE colleges that chose to continue to work with employers, create a commercially-driven market. Perhaps this was a solution to the concerns voiced within respondents’ opinions regarding dialogue and the relevance of provision, as effective relationships, dialogue, and quality would drive the offer and range of services? “We need to provide a really good quality service”, noted *Interviewee C*. At the moment, the respondent pointed out, FE colleges needed to hit all their contracts (for example apprenticeship, adult and commercial aspects) in order to be sustainable. This, the respondent believed, would not always be the case. “Colleges and providers will evolve; they will change to make it a fully commercial offer.”

Under this evolution, did they believe that the quality would be fully determined by the employers rather than by a third party? “Absolutely. And you’d hope so”, the respondent reflected. “You’d hope that the quality would drive the market because the best providers will survive and thrive.” This would be a strong contrast to the current system, which the respondent believed was a cost-cut driven market rather than a quality-driven one, whereby one FE college or provider may be offering a service for £10,000 and another for £5,000 within which they were perceived to be the same. If the future for FE college employer provision was to be fully commercial, the relationship between employers and FE colleges would need to be “absolutely key.”

*Interviewee A* believed that the current lack of a strong relationship approach to developing employer links from some colleges helped create negative perceptions of FE colleges within government. As examples, the respondent cited a resultant perception being one where private training providers are assumed to be more responsive than FE colleges to the needs of employers. Another perception suggested was that, where the relationships between FE colleges and industry worked well, it was

because colleges had industry more involved and therefore “what they [the government] take from that is ‘where industry is more involved is better’. And so they think it’s because industry have led the way.” There was also a belief that the government was chipping away at employers’ perceptions of FE colleges through a variety of policies and initiatives;

“I do think that it is getting more and more difficult to have proper relationships with employers because of all this other type of ‘promise’ on the other side. You know, ‘we will fund you direct’; ‘you can have employer ownership’; ‘you can bid’; ‘you can be funded’; ‘we can get you on our registers’...all these things. And employers are starting to look in a different way.”

For *Interviewee C*, it also depended on the FE college, particularly when determining relevant provision to help support the businesses competitiveness of their employers. The respondent believed that some colleges did make good use of the funding provided to them to support employer competitiveness “if the college or provider has a really strong curriculum strategy which is based on local labour market intelligence.”

### **Funding and the economic perspective**

Reflecting on the current system of funding available from the government in return for nationally-proscribed qualifications delivered at a local level, *Interviewee C* reiterated that “if a college has a really good curriculum strategy and it’s linked, absolutely aligned with local need, then yes, those funds can be directed appropriately.”

“I think it’s really, really important”, added *Interviewee A*, reflecting on the possible limitations this approach may have, “that when the college engages with employers that it’s about the whole offer, the whole thing...It really has to be collaborative for it to work fully and properly.” In other words, the ideal approach being suggested here was

one where, for some organisations, qualifications and skills provision supported by government funding may be an appropriate *part* of the solution to provide employee development. However, in addition to this, there may be a requirement for bespoke skills delivery, paid for by the employer at commercial rates, in order to fully develop their workforce and provide true business competitiveness for that organisation.

*Interviewee A* suggested that “very few employers really value training where they’re willing to pay a full cost.” In those situations, the respondent reflected, “the reality of it is, if they are not willing to pay, they can only have the qualifications that we’re funded for, and when they want things outside of that, it is very expensive.” In those situations, this lack of perceived value on the part of employers would result in FE colleges only partially meeting their workforce development needs and therefore, as the respondent notes, “everything stacks up against it working well.”

A different perspective regarding the attitudes employers may have towards training and development was offered by *Interviewee B*. “I think that probably the current economic situation has changed for employers and how they perhaps see training their workforce,” the respondent suggested. There was a consideration offered of whether employers had the time to train anyone due to the pace of their workplace, which was perhaps creating a self-defeating cycle of not taking individuals on to develop due to a perceived cost of training time.

The *Employer* interviewed added some support to this respondent’s suggestion. “The problem we’ve got,” they illustrated, “from a business point of view, is taking the employee away from work.” As a result, “a lot of the training we actually get the college involved in is NVQ training, which is on the job. So it’s not really taking the individual away from the shop floor.” This way, employers would continue to hit their business output targets, as well as train their staff, who are incentivised to achieve their NVQs

through receiving increases in salary as they become qualified. The employer's training was tailored to respond to their specific workforce requirements and had been developed in close collaboration with their FE college. As *Interviewee C* noted, "it's all delivered on site, in a range of qualifications, so it's not just one qualification, it's variety, probably up to maybe six or seven qualifications."

*Interviewee B* also pointed out that not everything necessarily needs to be a long-term commitment or investment for employers, particularly as many people "want quick fixes at the moment." The respondent suggested that, with many businesses concerned about day to day survival, "the sort of time and energy you invest has perhaps become more of an issue" for some employers when considering the training needs of their employees. This suggestion, if a true reflection of employers' concerns, further highlighted the need for FE colleges to have strong, personal relationships with their employer partners and to closely understand their individual needs and pressures. In this way individualised training could be offered, tailored to positively impact upon business needs.

### **Relationships and communicating the benefits**

The opinion voiced by *Interviewee A* of employers not being willing to pay for training, possibly due to the lack of perceived benefits they would receive from that training, echoed the evidence already gathered and summarised in **Model E** within the *Delivery* strand. A summary of the feedback, particularly within the *promotions and availability* responses, evidenced that not only were *relationships important* and *competition fierce*, but *businesses have a poor understanding of the benefits FE colleges can provide*. This was identified as an area for further investigation within the semi-structured interviews and one that was emerging as a possible area, not just for communications improvement, but potentially as a benefit for all parties involved. If FE colleges were able to effectively communicate with their employers and highlighted the specific

business competitive benefits they could gain from investing in skills development and training, the *cost* could be able to be perceived as an *investment*. Communicating the value and impact of investing in business-competitive skills development would appear to be an area of maximum benefit for FE colleges, government and employers alike.

*Interviewee A* was convinced that if FE colleges communicated information to employers in terms they understood they would be interested. For instance, if there was information regarding a new national or local initiative that could help employers, this would be something they would “automatically look at because it sounds like there is a support of some sort.” Although this could be done through marketing methods such as mail shots, that approach was perceived to be quite supply-driven and one-way. The respondent believed;

“the most effective way of really engaging to support supply and demand is really on a one-to-one because every business has different needs. You can’t have ‘one size fits all’. So you can do all the mail shots in the world but they’ll only, you know, if you do a hundred, they’ll only hit five or ten of them who have that immediate need. If you’re lucky five or ten! And so it’s got to be on an individual basis and bringing back market intelligence and shaping it from that really.”

The personal approach was one that was supported by *Interviewee C*. “I have regular meetings”, the respondent reported. The respondent speaks to their employers once a week or fortnight and the employers speak to “members of the team, maybe every one or two days. So the dialogue is probably informal in most cases, but highly frequent.” This approach was complemented by formal follow-ups, sometimes involving their Human Resources Director to ensure their support was meeting their business needs. For commercial courses, there was always a survey follow up to check everything was okay. The informal side, according to *Interviewee C*, “tends to work much better, because if there are any issues, a survey won’t necessarily articulate that clearly. If

there are any positives then again that will come out much more strongly than it would in a survey. And then you can have a conversation.” This way, the FE college can discuss and evolve the relationship with the business, as well as the development of their training. “We have strong informal chats,” reflected the respondent; “I think they can be very, very successful.”

The personal approach was endorsed by *Interviewee A*, who pointed out the importance of liaising with the right individuals. A lot depended on

“who in the company that you speak to. I think if they’re talking to the wrong person, you don’t get the information...You could be talking to the managing director who may or may not understand what’s going on on the shop floor. You might be talking to the HR department, who are probably more likely to know what the skills demands are. You might be talking to someone who’s more of a supervisor who doesn’t really fully understand what the company as a whole is trying to achieve. So there are so many different levels that you might get the link in and if it’s not the right person, it’s probably a waste of time.”

*Interviewee C* had one of their employers with them during this interview who supported the communication benefits of this informal approach through the development of strong relationships. “From an employer’s side, the informal one is probably easier and better because of the relationship. So we’ve got an assessor from the college who comes out, one of them once a week and then others once every few weeks, so if there are any issues that I have at the time, I relay to them, they relay back to their manager and then it goes through the chain from the college side.”

This approach to FE college and employer relationships is a long-term investment decision for an FE college, requiring leadership support, as well as a commitment of

time and staff resources. As the *Employer* articulated; having strong established relationships was valued by businesses. They illustrated this by highlighting how they could discuss issues and needs via a conversation, such as:

“can you do this or can you do that’, they’ll say ‘yes, I’ll have a look at that’ and then within the day I’ve probably got an email saying ‘right, yes we can do that; this is how we’ll do it’.”

“That’s not a bad illustration to be honest with you”, added *Interviewee C*, pointing out that it supported both the development of skills and training, as well as helped address any issues early and iron them out before they became a problem. The respondent considered this approach, from executive-level interaction and support, through director-level programme design and college staff communicating with Team Leaders or other relevant people within the company, to be the “perfect model” for an FE college-employer relationship. This model, the respondent believed, worked well regardless of the size of the company;

“We do this with a lot of companies and it tends to work well. Some cases, what happens if you are talking about a small hairdressers, or you’re talking about a one-person business, then the delivery level could be the key link. But even so, we do try to involve those people at the higher level from the college’s point of view, in terms of events, corporate events, awards. Working with 500 employers it’s quite difficult. So you do rely on your staff to have the same culture and the same customer service.”

*Interviewee A* was convinced that a strong team of individuals within the college, developing relationships with the right staff within business was the correct approach to take. “I think they are crucial, critical in helping us understand how to market...I do really.” This team also needed to fit correctly within the FE college as a whole, rather than being treated as a function of the college that was not fully integrated into it. Part



of the problem for some colleges, this respondent believed was that the development of employer relationships was not seen as a priority or responsibility for the whole college; rather it was the function of a business unit. What happens then, they suggested, was that “employers only see the little bits,” rather than the whole college working with them.

“We do have a department called ‘Employer Services’,” noted *Interviewee C*, which looked after on-site assessment and other business-critical aspects of the FE college-employer relationship. However, the respondent was adamant that it was vital they had “a full-college culture because we have such a large part of our work that is employer-driven.” The respondent illustrated this further by pointing out that, in terms of relationship development and the culture of their college, “the vast majority of our staff are involved with direct employer delivery or direct employer dialogue.” They concluded this example by adding that they positively “encourage our staff to work through their networks, and obviously work through the existing networks we have.” In that way, positive recommendations and referrals could be generated by colleagues within the college, as well as by satisfied customers through employer networks. Relationships and delivery that delights the employer was crucial. “It’s a small world,” the *Employer* noted; one where employer satisfaction is vital and businesses talk to each other.

“As a business, if you’re getting what you want from a company, then why move anywhere else? You know, companies only move if they’re not getting what they want. And that’s it.”

### **Further reflection on impact**

The research feedback from the pilot and main studies highlighted mixed practice at best, of a consistent understanding on the part of FE college leaders of the impact or difference their support and skills offer made to employers. During the semi-structured

interviews, a number of respondents highlighted the importance of developing strong relationships at various levels of their businesses. Discussions with these respondents investigated college leaders' approaches to seeking feedback and undertaking impact analysis, and whether that helped in shaping their relationships and future skills offer. As an example of this, *Interviewee B* illustrated how they undertook questionnaire analysis with their employers and reflected in the interview upon whether that analysis truly reached the heart of the area of impact. "I think the issue really relating to the questionnaires is the impact," the respondent considered, "of what impact does that make? And quantifying that impact is what employers find difficult and consequently us as an organisation find difficult." The respondent further reflected on the difficulties facing a true measure of impact, suggesting that an area of difficulty was one of understanding what the definition or measure of that impact should be;

"I had this conversation this week about a visit and I said 'well I've changed now all the criteria that I'm assessing things on and I'm making sure we've got criteria', so I can put examples of what I was doing differently as a consequence. Whether I can show that in some kind of bottom-line measurement is harder because I'd be doing a combination of things and I think that's where it struggles."

*Interviewee A* reflected on the observation that very few colleges had solid examples of effective and consistent measures to understand the impact they made to business effectiveness. If that was the case, the question was raised that if an FE college did not understand the impact that it made on businesses, it would not know what is effective, what to continue, or what to change. "That's a really good point," the respondent considered, "I don't think colleges tend to." The respondent reflected on changes they had been making in that direction recently. This college had made the assumption that, because the apprentices they train were still employed at the end of their apprenticeship, then the impact of that training had

been successful. Recently however, the respondent had felt that this was not a reasonable assumption to make and had put in place impact measure changes that more accurately analysed these assumptions. The respondent highlighted how, to understand the impact their training had made for the apprentice, they looked at the benefits for the employer of continued employment for the individual;

“we’ve just put in something to follow that up in six weeks, and then so many months, so that we understand whether or not they are still employed in the employer where they completed their apprenticeship and if not, what have they done next. Have they used that or have they just ended up back maybe in a lesser place? So that we can really get a feel and start to say hopefully something like ‘ninety per cent of our apprentices were still in employment in the place where they completed their training six months after. We’ll start to do that.”

The above reflections outline some examples of impact measures from the college leaders interviewed. These bespoke measures had been introduced not because of funding, government requests, or other outside pressure or requirements, but because they wanted to understand the difference their FE college made to employers and businesses. There is currently no nationally-determined impact-measure process, so the definition of the impact and the evidence of the measures of success were solely down to the consideration of the individuals who put them in place.

A different example was also offered from one respondent, whereby a group of colleges they knew had collaborated to collectively reflect on their impact.

*Interviewee A* recalled that the group of colleges had commissioned

“an economic impact analysis of the colleges in their location, and they found significant impact but the measure was mainly in terms of things, mainly in terms of

them being an employer, and such a big employer, and the services that they sold and the people that they impacted on, rather than the impact of what they did. And I think that would be a more interesting...I think you need both”

*Interviewee C* had a strong belief that it was the college’s culture of building personal relationships with their employers that helped them understand the impact and difference they made. The *Employer* agreed that it was all about a partnership approach to skills development and that for them, a positive impact of that partnership was one where they could work closely together with their FE college. The *Employer* illustrated the point by noting that

“if we need something in particular, then we can go there and we can develop it together. And that provides the college with the financial side, because we will pay for the time and the qualification, but it also allows us to actually develop something that can be tailored to what we need and that can be used in the future for skills development.”

*Interviewee B* reflected that “I think impact and employee; that conversation needs to go on more and be a focus of their training. And I’m not sure that always happens; you understand why they’re training people.”

*Interviewee B* added a further observation, and suggested that it could be down to an individual within the college (rather than a direction the college had taken), that would make the difference when it came to identifying impact. Although guidance and direction from within a college can aim to shape the culture and attitude towards employer-relationship building, measuring impact and identifying areas for change or improvement may ultimately be down to the attitude of individual college employer relationship team members;

“I think it’s also an issue about individuals, so I think you find from my experience I’ve got some people who’ve been on a visit, like it, say it’s all good, but they haven’t changed anything since. And there was me, where I’d got lots of ideas from doing something; I’ve got to limit the ideas really, where I don’t think other people are like that. Or feel in a position to.”

The research studies in **Chapters 4** and **5** asked participants whether there would be any benefit in having a national measure of impact effectiveness, rather than relying on some colleges, or individuals within them, to take the initiative. Mixed responses were received, from those who saw a benefit, to those who perceived it would be just a snapshot not to be taken in isolation, to those who saw a cost and no benefit. During the semi-structured interview, *Interviewee A* voiced the opinion:

“I think that you should have an economic impact of colleges because if a college disappears from a town sometimes the heart of the town disappears, and the town can go down rapidly. And it’s not just because of the skills that they were delivering in the town because you can get them out of the town, it’s because of the workforce impact and the financial impact on the town centre, and things like that.”

When considering whether there would be a benefit to having a national impact measure that colleges could benchmark themselves against, *interviewee B* responded positively:

“Well, I think if we could get it done nationally it would be great because you’ve got probably the best minds in the country sorting out a problem which is hard.”

The respondent did not feel it would be easy, considering the question of what and how to measure impact to be a complex one; certainly not one as simplistic as counting the number and levels of qualifications delivered.

“And that’s the problem, that ...the expectation of colleges is so great about showing that we’ve had that impact. I find it quite interesting how quickly that’s sort of changed, that it’s us, it’s our fault now. No one’s saying ‘well, I’m occupying all these people so they’re off the streets’...that’s not good enough anymore... But I would appreciate some work on it nationally”

*Interviewee B* illustrated the above point by providing a benefit of a national measure or benchmark as being one that could help balance individual FE leaders’ judgements. As an example, the respondent illustrated some success data they had regarding supporting people into employment and how, in their opinion, they did not feel the success rate was good enough, but compared nationally it may have ended up being considerably above benchmark. The use of a consistent measure of impact therefore could help FE college leaders gain a sense of a sector-wide perspective.

As a final suggestion, the respondent suggested that, rather than measure whether a short course or a qualification had been delivered to a business, which measured an outcome but did not really measure impact, a more personal measure of effectiveness could be considered. If the impact measure looked at bespoke products or solutions the FE college had created and delivered to meet a business’ needs; something that was “more specific to the employer, you’d be able to do the impact and review more easily because you’d be looking at a specific issue that they wanted to address.” This could then measure outcomes in terms of FE colleges for example having helped businesses to secure new contracts, or develop their supply

chain, or increase their turnover, as a result of the specific skills and training solution they had received.

For *Interviewee A*,

“it would be really interesting to try and separate out the impact that the skills training has had. I hadn’t even thought about this before, but I’m starting to think about it now.”

The respondent further reflected;

“The only difficulty you’d have doing it in, say if you started small scale...We’ll do it for all the companies that have had training off us in the last three years, for example; see where they are. The difficulty is, they may have also had training from someone else, or there may be other companies outside of that circle that have had training from someone else, and it would be really difficult to show that it was just the impact of the college. So you’d have to really do more impact of training generally.”

### **Summary of the semi-structured interviews**

The semi-structured interviews allowed for an investigation into the rich depth of detail on the themes and questions highlighted during the prior research. The path of the conversation was planned and highlighted in **Table 28** and allowed for discussion around topics that had previously emerged, as well as provided an opportunity to discuss related topics of importance to the individual respondents.

The semi-structured interviews are viewed to be a vital part of this research, as they have provided an opportunity to generate further details and ideas as part of an

interactive dialogue as well as add depth to the research and information already uncovered. Detail from the discussions has been presented in this chapter.

The following paragraphs summarise some of the key points discussed in this chapter. **Table 29** summarises the evidence on the relevant points covered in a comparable format to **Table 27** in the previous chapter. There are some subtle differences between the findings which have resulted in a slightly revised model, **Model F**, at the end of the chapter.

### **Impact**

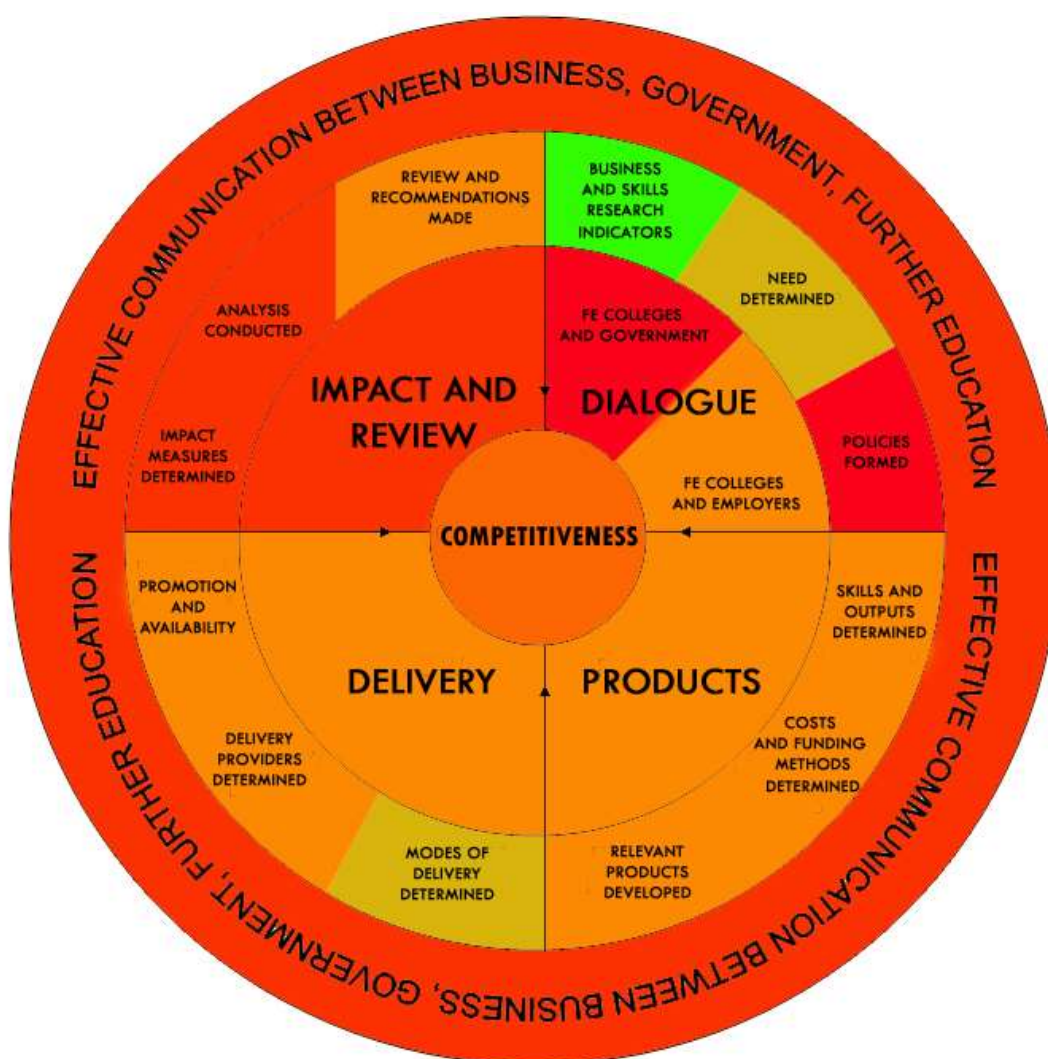
The discussion around impact, although woven throughout the interviews, started and finished on respondents' reflections on the impact FE colleges made towards business competitiveness. All respondents believed that FE did make an impact on business competitiveness. This was seen in a positive light, although there was an acknowledgement and reflection that FE colleges were not as close to businesses as they could/should be. This was possibly because FE colleges were qualification and contract-driven; possibly because FE colleges did not spend enough time developing close relationships with employers to understand the needs of business.

The investment of time and development resources, as well as a determination on behalf of individual FE college leaders would be required for this position to change throughout the sector.








Nature of Practice	Topic	Evidence Summary
Good/ Mixed	Impact	FE makes a positive impact on business competitiveness, possibly at different levels.
Mixed - Poor	Impact Measures Determined	No consistent methods. Informal dialogue helps determine development and reflection – not necessarily consistent across the sector. Some questionnaires conducted. Some groups of colleges had conducted economic impact studies, which was positive but did not necessarily measure the impact of what they had done to impact upon business competitiveness. Agreement that a national measure of impact would be of benefit – the key would be in determining how to do it.
Mixed - Poor	Impact and Review	No comparison across the sector – difficult to benchmark against other FE colleges. Not convinced dialogue always takes place as to why employees are being trained, making it difficult to understand business needs and the nature of impact.
Mixed - Poor	Continuous Communication between Business, Government, FE	There is communication, but not very effective – poorer than perceived in the previous research. Voice of FE not being listened to by the government. Government not necessarily listening to needs of smaller businesses or FE colleges. FE colleges not listening enough to the needs of employers.
Mixed - Poor	Analysis Conducted	Inconsistent and, on reflection, some assumed methods need improving. Questionnaires.
Mixed	Dialogue  Between FE colleges and Employers	FE colleges not as close to businesses as they could be. Business perception of the value of FE colleges declining. Some colleges within the sector lacking in responsiveness. More focus on product than effective dialogue. Opportunity for strong relationships and to develop commercial-only funded training. Weak dialogue – needs improving. Some colleges strong on curriculum and needs-driven relationships.
Poor	Dialogue  Between FE colleges and Government	Probably at an all time low. Government not listening to the voice of the sector. Decision-makers at the strategic level appear too far removed from what is happening for effective dialogue. Dialogue too short-term focussed. Government perceives more weaknesses than strengths in the sector.
Mixed	Relevant Products Developed	Some FE colleges have a culture of needs-driven curriculum strategy. Some FE colleges weak on product development.
Mixed	Products	Mixed balance between products developed through close relationships and those offered because funding is available.
Mixed	Promotion and Availability	FE sector poor at communicating the business value of investment in training. Informal relationships at the right levels within businesses and FE colleges most effective way of developing the offer and relationships. Mail-shots and marketing promotions secondary to relationships – useful for information communication, but quite one-way dialogue.
Poor	Policies Formed	Unnecessary change and lack of continuity. Lack of strategic planning – FE colleges reacting to government policy all the time. Longer-term approach to policies required rather than apparent knee-jerk decision-making. Change heavily weighted towards larger businesses and in danger of excluding small employers.

**Table 29**  
**Summary of FE leaders' perception of nature of practice**



**Model F**  
*Theoretical flow for FE skills delivery leading to business competitiveness with full research responses colour-overlaid*

Key to colours used	
	Good practice and strong evidence
	Between Good and Mixed
	Mixed practice and/or evidence
	Between Mixed and Poor
	Poor practice and weak/no evidence



As the conversations evolved, it became clear that there was no single definition of impact that currently existed with which to measure the difference FE colleges made towards business competitiveness. There was a feeling that there were few solid examples across the sector that showed impact effectiveness, and that colleges as a whole did not really understand the differences they were making. Without a consistent measure, what appears good or poor to one FE college leader or employer could appear very different to another.

Positive examples were presented of questionnaire feedback and informal discussions, which did help develop an understanding of how some individual colleges partly measured employer impact. Sometimes, it was suggested, this approach to understanding impact was ad hoc and down to an individual staff member taking forward, rather than a direction set within the organisation.

Although some groups of colleges had produced localised examples of economic impact measures that their colleges had made to their regions, this was seen as a measure too broad for an understanding of individual employer needs. If there was a possibility of creating one, a national measure of impact was perceived to be a positive idea. The measure that would be welcomed would be one that could help balance FE college leaders' judgements of how they were responding to employers' needs relative to each other. Ideally, this would be one that did not look at numbers of qualifications delivered (which was not seen to measure impact) but one that measured a more personal impact, for example, the number of bespoke solutions FE colleges had created to address local or individual employer issues. Outcome impact measures could then look at more business-related factors, such as number of new contracts secured, supply chains developed, turnover increased, etc. as a result of the skills and training that had been delivered.

## **Communication**

Communication between stakeholders had been highlighted as having mixed practice at best in responses uncovered in the research to date. The topic generated considerable discussion with respondents, and conclusions did not fare much better here. Dialogue between FE colleges and the government was felt to be poor. There was no question that there were a lot of government policies produced that affected FE colleges or their learners, but there was a question as to whether these were always based on a thorough understanding of the FE sector, or whether they were created more as a whim or knee-jerk reaction. Communication and dialogue that did take place was felt to be too short-term based, resulting in halting the FE sector's ability to truly develop its relationships and services to business due to the fact that it was often in danger of running to stand still. Planning for the sector that lasted longer than a single term of government was suggested.

There was a belief that the government perceived more that was wrong about the sector than was right, despite many examples of good practice. The Association of Colleges was held as a good representation of the voice of the FE college sector and should, it was suggested, be listened to and its recommendations considered more.

This perception was balanced by a belief that the government did recognise the value of FE colleges, for example by trusting colleges to deliver job outcomes that previously had been outside their remit. It was suggested that policies which removed funding from FE colleges and then offered it directly to employers did present a negative picture of FE colleges from the government to employers and did not help in the development of strong relationships.

FE colleges, it was suggested, had not had strong dialogue over the years with employers and had developed products that were not needs-driven or developed through dialogue and partnerships with employers. This approach resulted in a lack of business skills development through strong relationships and communication. It was acknowledged that this was a generalisation, and that there were examples of good practice and dialogue throughout the country, but not throughout the sector as a whole. Dialogue and relationships between FE colleges and employers were predicted to evolve and adapt, possibly moving away from the need to rely on funding from the government and would, due to that approach, become needs-driven through strong communication and relationship development.

### **Funding**

Respondents reflected on the fact that, if employer provision truly was needs-driven, then government funding would only account for part of the offer that was delivered. Not all employers needed qualifications as the whole, or part of their training solution. Whilst qualifications were important, there was also a requirement for bespoke skills delivery, paid for by the employer at commercial rates, in order to fully develop their workforce and provide true business competitiveness for that organisation. The responses suggested that colleges had not effectively communicated the benefits to employers of training their workforce, and as a result many employers perceived training as a cost, rather than an investment.

### **Relationships**

Strong relationships were seen to be vital for FE colleges wishing to develop the workforce and success of the businesses they worked with. The personal approach was vital and informal relationships suggested as the most effective. Marketing mail shots and other forms of promotion were helpful, but were nowhere near as helpful as the positive impact that could be gained from having strong relationships.

Isolating an employer services team from the rest of the college was not perceived to be the most effective way to develop strong relationships. The ideal FE college structure would be one where there were strong informal relationships that involved all members of the college, who liaised with the right individuals at the right levels within the business, and created an overall college culture that understood the importance of business relationships.

## **Conclusion**

The previous summaries illustrate how closely the themes are linked and reinforce the structure of the research model that has evolved throughout the research journey.

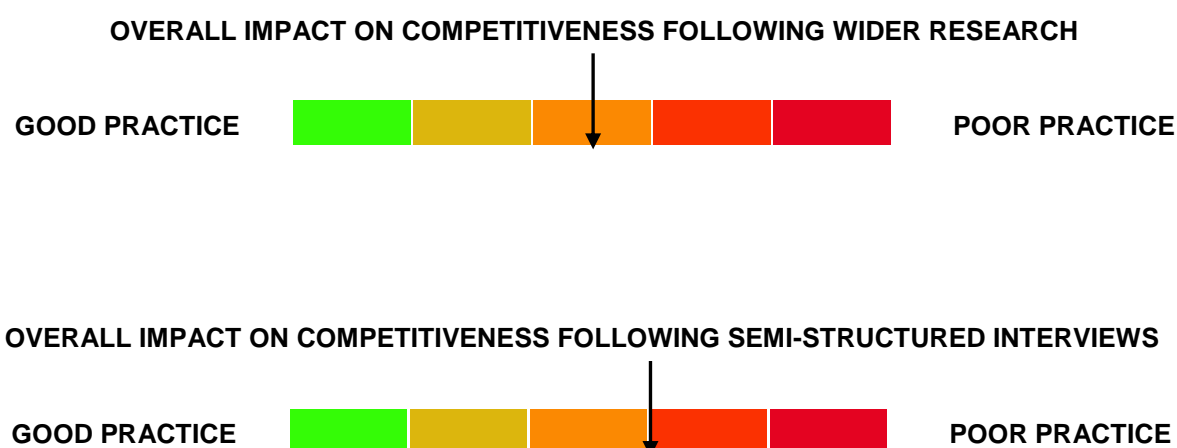
Reflecting on the evidence obtained via the semi-structured interviews and comparing with the evidence from the previous research, there are variations which have been interpreted on the amended model, **Model F**.

A key amendment is to the outer layer. Having discussed the issues with FE college leaders, it was clear that there is ongoing communication between FE colleges, government and businesses. However, just because it is taking place did not mean it was regarded as effective. There were examples of good practice, mainly evidenced between FE colleges and businesses, but these did not appear to be consistent across the sector, or necessarily operate effectively at all levels within individual colleges. Communication was taking place between the FE college sector and government, but was felt to be at an all-time low. There is concern that the dialogue between government and business was excluding the voice of small organisations and was therefore not representative. As such, the phrasing of the outer layer has been amended from *Continuous* to *Effective*, and, based on the interview responses received, downgraded to between *mixed* and *poor* practice.

The *Impact and Review* section, following significant examples and evidence, remains unchanged. The *Delivery* section, although less of a focus for the interviews, also remains unchanged based on the responses received. The *Products* section receives a considered downgrading for the *skills and outputs determined* category, mainly based on the feedback that suggested a lack of FE college sector understanding of business' needs and a tendency (on the part of some FE colleges) to offer a product-based rather than informed and demand-led curriculum offer.

It is the *Dialogue* section that has received the most significant changes. It became clear during the discussions with FE college leaders that there were several layers required when it came to considering dialogue. As such, the inner section has been sub-divided into two sections. Dialogue between *FE colleges and the government*, based on the feedback from the semi-structured interviews, is one of the poorest areas in this *Competitiveness* model. From feedback that suggested the voice of the sector was not listened to, to a belief that the government perceived there to be more wrong than right with the sector, there was very little positive evidence that the dialogue taking place was effective, of value and of benefit. This perception carried through to a reappraisal of the *Policies Formed* section too which, from descriptions of short-termism to policies being created as whims, did not suggest there was much to praise in the development of policies from the FE college leaders' perspective. There was perhaps a note of positivity in the recognition that the FE college sector was being trusted to deliver job outcomes, but this was countered by the eroding of employer perception of FE through the removal and redirecting of funding.

For dialogue between *FE colleges and Employers*, there was evidence of mixed practice, sometimes across the sector, sometimes within a college itself. This subsection reflects that feedback accordingly.



**Table 30**  
**Comparison of overall competitiveness feedback**

The feedback from the interviews does have a cumulative impact upon the overall nature of competitiveness. As can be seen on **Model F**, and repeated as a comparative section in **Table 30** above, the overall position has slipped from one being balanced around *Mixed Practice*, to one moving towards between *Mixed and Poor Practice*.

The next chapter will reflect on the research work undertaken. Strengths and limitations of the research methods and process used will be discussed, along with suggestions for further development and research.



## **Chapter 7 – Conclusions and recommendations**

The preceding chapters have presented a study, reflections and analysis on a research investigation into the impact leaders of colleges of further education in England believed their organisations contributed towards business competitiveness.

The research took place over a period of approximately five years from 2009-2014. During that period of time, there was much change that directly related to the research topic. For example;

- A protracted recession and prolonged period of austerity nationally and globally has had an impact on the resources available to purchase and deliver employer-focussed skills and training, resulting in a greater need for clear benefits to employers of investing their resources in training provided by FE colleges.
- The political leadership in England changed in 2010 from a Labour to a Conservative-led coalition government, resulting in new policies with a greater emphasis on FE colleges delivering employability and employment-related outcomes, in addition to learning outcomes.
- Changes to the nature of funding for the FE sector saw a shift of funding previously allocated to FE colleges move directly to employers, resulting in a greater need for FE colleges to ensure they had strong employer partnerships in order to have the opportunity to access these funds. The nature of apprenticeship funding is proposed to follow a similar path in the near future, emphasising the continuing need to develop and maintain close and effective FE college-employer relationships.

The focus of this research topic remains if anything more relevant today than when it began. This concluding chapter reflects on the evolution of the research over the past

five years and highlights the potential contribution the research makes towards knowledge and practice. Strengths and limitations of the research are considered and recommendations for further discussion and research will be made.

### **Evolution of learning and proposed contribution to knowledge**

As this research project is reflected upon, it is acknowledged that it has, through analysis of literary thinking, research methodology, reflection and layers of respondent feedback, evolved since its original beginning in 2009. Consideration and thought has emerged and evolved over the course of this research by means of the analysis (Bell, 2010, p.16). This supports research theory regarding the incremental unfolding of knowledge and how it can progress and evolve over time (Kuhn, 1962, pp.23-24; Kliem, 2004, p.27). It is suggested that knowledge and learning has emerged as a direct result of undertaking this work.

### **Proposed contribution of the research model**

Proposed evidence of a contribution to knowledge and learning is reflected in the evolution of the research model; one that in its concluding form (**Model F**) has evolved considerably from the initial model proposed prior to undertaking the research (**Model A**). The model itself will be looked at in more detail later within this chapter, as it provides a potential contribution to research practice for others to use and build upon. However, from a research learning and knowledge perspective, the significant and obvious change is the move from a flat model which proposed a visually linear cause and effect, to one that reflects a cycle of continuous effect, bounded by communication, with impact and competitiveness at its heart.

The breakthrough in the evolution of this model can be attributed directly to the nature of the research process itself. The sub-themes, derived as a result of the literature review, overlaid on the model during its pilot stage and amended as a result of the pilot

feedback obtained, created a framework that was not just changed as a result of the feedback, but also in danger of suffering from a lack of clarity. As a result, a change was necessary to avoid losing the themes and weightings of the data that was being uncovered, whilst at the same time remaining focussed on the topic at the heart of the research question. Work undertaken during the course of the literature review; specifically the creation of the factors impacting upon business competitiveness (shown as **Table 2**) provided the framework for the model's evolution. Without the considerations made at the literature review stage, it is highly unlikely that the model would have been able to evolve so naturally, as well as tie in with the literature findings, and provide this work with an opportunity to contribute towards knowledge. This enabled the model to not only evolve during the next two stages of the research process, but also adapt as a result of the new evidence and data being uncovered due to its strong structure. The research undertaken has positively impacted upon the evolution of the model and it is suggested that incremental steps towards wider learning and knowledge on the subject has taken place as a result.

### **Supporting research methodology analysis – the value of research stages**

Consideration of the evolution of learning during the course of this research must also take into account the work undertaken at the analysis of the research methodology stage, in particular, the importance of conducting pilot research. It was acknowledged how, as well as providing the opportunity to influence and develop the initial theoretical model (Maxwell, 2013, p.67), pilot studies could also help smooth out problems and refine techniques (Banister, et al, 2011, p. 66). This certainly was the case. As shown in **Tables 18-21**, changes were made to the research questions as a direct result of the pilot study. Despite a lengthy process in determining the pilot research stage, some questions received considerable response, others either no response, data of little significance, or needed modifications. Following analysis and reflection, some alterations to the research questions were needed. One example of these alterations

included the removal of a question regarding FE leaders' knowledge of what their businesses thought about the training and services their college provided, as it received no feedback. Another example was the modification of a question regarding college investment in research and development for business training. This evolved into a question regarding continuous college resource investment in research to develop products that support the competitiveness of the business in order to provide more focussed answers. This process benefitted from an analysis of research theory having been undertaken, which highlighted how pilot research could help focus the nature of the evidence being sought as well as reduce the risk of receiving non-meaningful answers (Monette, et al, 2014, p.9).

It is proposed that additional potential contributions to knowledge achieved as a result of the pilot research stage were themes uncovered that had not previously been considered, or which had been felt to be of less importance prior to undertaking the research. This followed on directly from the research theory that highlighted how pilot studies could alert researchers to the crucial elements that support the objectives of the study (Seidman, 2006, p.39), and provide an opportunity to refine or rethink elements. One example of the topics that emerged within the pilot research was that of a non-college-wide approach to responding to the needs of businesses from many respondents; effectively sidelining the responsibility for business responsiveness to a department or small team within the FE college. As a direct result, this topic became embedded into the further research.

Another new topic that emerged was the theme of whether colleges always recommended skills and training solutions that contributed towards business competitiveness, regardless of whether funding was available. Amendments and additions to funding and qualification-related questions were also made as a result of the raised importance of these themes that emerged at the pilot research stage.

Without conducting the pilot research, the potential for contribution to knowledge on this research question would have been less and the opportunity to discover more on the nature of these topics would have been missed.

The research stage that followed benefitted from the preceding pilot and substantial findings were discovered which allowed the researcher to determine degrees of effectiveness within the research topics (**Table 27**) and overlay these onto the model (**Model E**). The evidence suggested a range of practice from *good with substantial evidence to poor with little to no evidence*. Examples of *good* and *good/mixed practice* included a wide range of strategies, policies and indicators evidencing business skills priorities and need, and an ever-growing range of FE college economic impact indicators. Another area of strength that was found to be widely evidenced within the data was the determination of need and delivery, whether funding-driven, qualification-driven, or determined by college teams through dialogue with businesses. Whilst no areas studied were found to be completely poor, there were areas within the nature of practice of study that came close. Examples of these included little evidence of colleges monitoring the impact their services had on business effectiveness, or an analysis and review of the appropriateness of its products. Where this did take place, it was found to be on an ad-hoc basis, with little consistency of measurement either within a college, or between colleges.

Despite the fact that a pilot stage had taken place and refinements had been made, there remained areas within the analysis of the research data that were found to be weak. This supported the belief uncovered during the research study process that, regardless of the prior care and consideration taken, the findings of all research projects ultimately have limitations (Monette, et al, 2014, p.78). The weaknesses may also have been the drawback of a familiarity of the topic on the part of the researcher; a topic that was also highlighted at the research methodology stage (Saunders, et al,

2009, pp.526). Ultimately, whatever the reason, the researcher felt that there were clarifications necessary as well as some weaknesses in areas of questioning at the main research stage around determining modes of delivery and evidencing promotion and course availability. These were reflected upon and built directly into the framework for the semi-structured interview stage (**Table 28**), highlighting evidence of research learning taking place and supporting a considered and triangulated approach to research methodology.

Allowing for a pilot research stage prior to the main phase and determining that an interview stage would follow the main phase added considerable time to the overall research process. It would have been tempting for the researcher to have ignored the recommendations and learning evidenced at the research methodology stage and removed one or two stages of this process for the sake of expediency. This would have been wrong. As has been discussed within this thesis, the discovery of knowledge is an incremental process (Kuhn, 1962, p.23; Lundberg and Young, 2005, p.47). Whilst there are no claims made within this research that everything that could be found from this process has been discovered; incremental learning and knowledge has taken place as a result. The journey towards knowledge that has been found shows how a continuously reflective and refined approach to the research process can produce both a depth to knowledge that would not have been otherwise possible, as well as an ever-increasing breadth of supportive evidence and examples.

### **Incremental contribution – evolving the over-arching research question**

One element that evolved through the process was the evolution of the research question. The tentative question in the original proposal was *what contribution to UK business competitiveness do colleges of further education make?* (Maykels, 2009, p.1). As can be seen from the title on this thesis, and the recommendations for further research within this chapter, the original title was a mere starting point for research and

thinking around the topic of further education and business competitiveness. The original proposal would have taken a wider research direction leading to an investigation into the impact on businesses within the UK of skills policies and delivery within the FE sector. Once the literature study began, the focus of the research question began to become more focussed and moved to one that asked *do colleges of further education contribute to the competitiveness of businesses in England?* This follows recommendations highlighted within the theory relating to the continuous evolution of the research process (Kirby, et al, 2006, p.19; Miller-Cochran and Rodrigo, 2014, p.75). By January 2012, the research methodology was underway. Reflection on this influenced a further change to the research question; *do leaders of colleges of further education in England believe that they contribute towards business competitiveness?* This refinement, made as a direct result of the findings within the literature and research methodology analysis, helped to narrow the scope of the work and determine the focus of exactly who the research stages would concentrate on.

By January 2013, the pilot research had been completed and the direction and scope of research was once again reflected on, to help focus refinements that may be necessary before conducting further research. Refinements to the focus of the research helped direct it towards *an investigation into the impact leaders of colleges of further education in England believe their organisations contribute towards business competitiveness*. In addition, a title heading *does further education mean business?* was introduced to help encapsulate the context of the work. This followed recommended research evolution practice (Whittemore and Melkus, 2008, p.204) and helped to ensure that the contributions obtained from the leaders of FE colleges would be as focussed on the research topic as possible, as well as further develop the research model.

## **Theory leading to knowledge**

### **How poor value perception uncovered a lack of effective communication and understanding of impact**

Issues relating to staff development and training were considered in **Chapter 2**.

Examples of these included the theme of effective organisations successfully aligning training needs for the individual and the organisation by viewing this as an investment rather than a cost (Bolman and Deal, 2003, p.129). It was noted that investing in education was a value for organisations through the generation of human capital (Vandenberghe, 1999, p.129). It was observed how seeing the workforce as a source of strategic advantage rather than a cost, combined with the successful utilisation of human resources could help organisations gain competitive success (Pfeffer, 1995, p.10).

To investigate the literature theories of investment rather than cost, this research looked at areas such as whether FE college leaders believed businesses chose training that was the most appropriate to them, and viewed the cost as a business investment, or whether they chose free training even if it was less appropriate for them. In the pilot study, contrary to the positive conclusions drawn throughout the literature study, seven out of nine respondents agreed or strongly agreed that businesses chose less appropriate training if it was “free”.

This suggested a reality occurring that was contrary to theory, where training was seen to be a cost rather than an investment. Although this was the perception of the majority of respondents, there was one respondent who did believe employers saw an investment value of training, noting that “in my experience, businesses do not appreciate or value 'free' as much as if they have to make a contribution.”



This theme was pursued in the next stage of the research. What has emerged from the research was the belief from respondents that employers appeared not to understand the true business value and potential positive impact of investing in the most effective and appropriate skills and training and, as a result, were more inclined to view training as a cost rather than as an investment. This resulted in employers choosing training that was “free” or funded rather than necessarily of most benefit.

The importance of the beliefs of the majority lay not in the fact that the opinions varied with the theory. These beliefs after all did not reflect the opinions of employers or indeed the issue as to whether or not employers saw training as an investment. What these responses did reveal was a belief from the majority of respondents that “free” training had less value than training that was directly paid for, as well as a belief that the training that was funded, and “free” was less appropriate for businesses.

The semi-structured interviews allowed for an opportunity to test and triangulate some of the themes, in particular the lack of understanding of the value, benefit and impact of training. Key findings that emerged included an acknowledgement and reflection that FE colleges were not as close to businesses as they could/should be. FE colleges did not spend enough time developing close relationships with employers to understand business needs. As a result, opportunities and reputational value may have become lost. This supported the literature that highlighted the importance of effective external communication which showed how it directly related to customer satisfaction (Webster and Sundaram, 2009, pp.104-105; Gronroos, 2004, p.107).

Few solid examples were evidenced to show how the FE sector consistently and regularly understood the effectiveness of the impact they made towards businesses and there was not a clear understanding of the differences FE colleges were making to businesses. As was discussed at the literature stage; employers wanted their training

to meet their current business needs and would invest if they perceived these needs would be met (Barrett and Mason, 2008, p.431; NAO, 2005, p.14; Medhat, 2010, p.17). As one respondent noted during the course of this research, “organisations don’t fully understand what colleges can offer so can’t align it to business need,” suggesting that this did not appear to be happening.

It is suggested that this research study contributes to the field of knowledge through providing direct feedback supporting the effects of a lack of understanding of the impact of the services the sector provides. At first, it appeared that, contrary to theory, businesses perceived training to be a cost rather than an investment. However, the apparent poor communication issue between FE colleges and businesses regarding the investment value of training to support business competitiveness became, through further discovery, an issue about FE colleges themselves lacking the understanding and knowledge of the impact of the services they provide.

If FE colleges are unable to evidence or understand the positive impact they make towards business competitiveness; it can be seen how difficult it becomes to articulate any benefits to employers (or indeed other stakeholders such as the government). This may contribute to the voiced beliefs that the government perceived more that was wrong about the sector than was right and that dialogue and communication between these parties, at least in one respondent’s mind, was currently at an all time low.

### **Proposed contribution to knowledge – summary**

The preceding text illustrates the proposed contribution to knowledge this thesis has provided;

- A research model, based initially upon an assumed ideal-world theory has evolved and has been refined and tested as a result of a detailed and relevant

literature review as well as three stages of research with individual leaders from further education colleges.

- Incremental learning and knowledge on the research topic has taken place by using a research methodology supported by a study of research theory based on a staged and reflective research approach.
- Literature theory provided an opportunity to test responses to contrary feedback on employer perceptions of the value of training, leading to a discovery of a lack of communication of the benefits of FE college training, a poor approach to maintaining effective dialogue and relationships, and a lack of impact measures of the business competitiveness benefits of training across the FE college sector.

It is also proposed that this thesis has made potential contributions to practice, and examples of these are evidenced below.

### **Proposed contribution to practice**

Employer responsiveness from training providers and the effective contribution of skills to support economic effectiveness has been a priority for governments that have served during the course of the production of this thesis. If anything, with the introduction of documents such as the *Further Education Workforce Strategy* (BIS, 2014) and reports such as *The Future of Work* (UKCES, 2014), an appropriately skilled workforce is considered to be more important to improving productivity than ever before. It is proposed that the findings within this thesis are of direct practical use.

### **A model for practical use**

A potential contribution to practice has been the development of a model, informed by leaders from within FE colleges, that highlights areas of strengths and weaknesses related to the research topic. This model, illustrated as **Model F**, has evolved over the course of the research and is one that is believed to have practical applications for the sector.

One application is that this model and the associated questions that have influenced its development, is now available for use across the sector. Should key stakeholders, such as the government, FE representative bodies such as the AoC, or further researchers wish to roll out to a wider population, it is possible to do so.

A second potential practical application is one that was raised by a respondent who was considering the model during part of their interview;

“What I would be really interested in is being really honest... is seeing if we could make this model...local, for us and local businesses...and see if we're the same, which we probably are... Because it would be a good starting point, wouldn't it? We could start to say 'One of the things we absolutely need is more dialogue, to impact on that, so how are we going to do that?'”

This highlights how, even within an individual FE college, the model could be adapted for use at a micro-level, to assess the individual college's own effectiveness and honest assessment of practice regarding the various themes, and allow for development and improvement targets to be set.

A third potential practical application was that, with minor modifications, this model has the potential to be transferred and used across other sectors. For example, if the specific links to FE and skills were removed and replaced with terms relevant to a major investment in a sector such as Advanced Manufacturing, or a major infrastructure investment, or for public sector investment, etc, there exists a practical framework available for wider consideration and adaptation.

It is believed the model, developed as a result of this thesis, has practical applications for use within the sector and also potential for adaptation and transfer to other sectors.

### **Practical themes for consideration**

There are several themes evidenced and highlighted within this thesis that could help improve the flow of effective FE skills delivery leading towards a positive impact on business competitiveness. Further research or investigation may be advisable before making any major changes as a result of these findings, and the limitations of this research will be discussed in the next section. However, the following themes, evidenced as a result of this research, are believed to be worthy of consideration.

### **Effective dialogue and communication**

This research has found effective dialogue and communication between FE colleges, government, employers and relevant stakeholders to range from *poor* to *poor/mixed*. Dialogue between government and FE colleges was seen to be short-term focussed and inconsistent. There was a negative picture from all respondents regarding communications and dialogue between government and FE colleges, particularly when it came to policies and decision-making. As one FE leader noted; “there’s no evidence at all that the government are listening to the views of FE and even some of the wider training providers.” This reportedly had the effect of halting the sector’s ability to plan and develop in partnership with appropriate stakeholders, due to FE colleges having to continuously react to policy changes. One respondent believed that, “the more strategic view of what we’re doing and how it all works, how we’re planning for the future, doesn’t happen.” Several FE leaders believed that the sector would benefit from a long-term cross-party agreement to aid with stability and planning.

Communication between FE colleges and businesses was balanced between *mixed* and *poor*. The research suggested that colleges had not effectively communicated the benefits to employers of training their workforce, and as a result many employers perceived training as a cost, rather than an investment. Not all respondents perceived

themselves to bear the responsibility for this. From some respondents, there was almost a suggestion of businesses and employers themselves being at fault for having a lack of understanding and awareness of the benefits of training rather than FE colleges taking ownership of responsibility for effectively communicating the benefits. Indications suggested a sector emphasis on a college-focussed rather than customer-focussed approach. Weak dialogue between FE colleges and employers was reported to be “probably the most important thing” that needed to be addressed.

Practical recommendations for improvement are:

- For government, FE colleges, employers and relevant stakeholders to have effective dialogue and communications in true partnership to agree long-term skills development planning.
- Government to consider the benefits and drawbacks of long-term cross-party agreements for the sector to provide strategic direction, stability and planning.
- FE colleges to develop effective communications and strong relationships that help determine appropriate customer-focussed skills development for businesses.

### **Focus on business need**

The research has evidenced a belief from a majority of respondents that FE colleges have focussed on delivery and product rather than develop skills based on a true understanding of individual business need and competitiveness. Examples to the contrary were also discussed. Feedback was received indicating that even within some FE colleges there was an inconsistency of approach. Leadership decisions regarding how FE colleges prioritised the investment of resources in time as well as staff were offered as strong reasons for a lack of a close understanding of business need.

For some FE colleges, a key factor limiting a consistent focus on business need was the lack of an organisation-wide college approach and responsiveness. Some FE

colleges had a separate business-facing unit; others did not. Regardless of the structure of the FE college, the organisational purpose for working with businesses must be communicated and understood by all who work there. Where this was not the case, there could become an internal culture wherein the focus on employer responsiveness and supporting business needs would become the business unit's responsibility rather than that of everyone within the FE college. Evidence showed that where this was the case, a lack of consistency in responding to business needs or supporting employers could develop. Although having a business-facing unit was seen to be a positive for FE colleges, if the rest of the organisation was less responsive and supportive towards business needs, the benefits to employers risked being lost.

Although the focus on business need was seen to be improving there was a feeling that the focus was "short term and still overly tied into qualification outcomes." The research generated respondent feedback that businesses did not always need qualifications and that business impact should be "more about the need of the business" rather than qualifications for the workforce. This focus on delivering qualifications was possibly because funding was available for some training and development (usually with a qualification outcome) and not others, creating a simpler product offer to 'sell'. This was in light of the admission from some leaders that they were aware the subsidised training was not always the most appropriate for their employers. As one respondent noted, "I think we're very much driven by qualifications and funding rather than what the needs of the employer are".

There is a strong belief on the part of FE college leaders that qualifications are not necessarily the solution to meeting a business' needs and that often state-subsidised or free training is less relevant than that which could be diagnosed through effective dialogue and customised at a full cost. This raises a practical issue of the need for FE colleges, government and stakeholders to effectively discuss and review what can and

cannot be state subsidised for delivery by FE colleges. This point connects closely with one of the practical recommendations previously discussed regarding effective dialogue and communication. If state funding is to continue to be available for business skills development, then the funding should, through effective consultation, be of relevance and value. It is worth considering whether the emphasis on delivering qualifications rather than skills, mentioned by many respondents as their driver, is the most effective way of determining business competitiveness. It could be possible that alternative measures would be worthy of consideration.

FE colleges may be taking the easier route to offering skills solutions to employers. Offering products that are subsidised but not the most appropriate for an employer or business involves less of a need for the college's employer-facing team to develop strong relationships and help their employers understand the benefits of investing in training. It also involves less of a need for an investment of internal resources in developing responsive employer-facing staff by the FE college. As one FE leader reflected, "colleges have to make decisions where they put their focus and whether or not they can afford to give a lot of time to certain elements of the curriculum." To understand and meet the needs of businesses takes an investment. "There is an extra cost if you are really, really flexible with your offer," one respondent noted, "because you've got to have more skills in your workforce to offer the full range of flexibility and opportunity that the qualifications offer."

Practical recommendations for improvement are:

- Assuming state funding to FE colleges to support business skills development continues; communications to take place between FE colleges, employers, government and other relevant stakeholders to consider alternatives to using qualifications as a measure of supporting businesses.



- FE colleges to consider their resource investment in developing close relationships with employers in order to provide skills and training based on an understanding of individual businesses needs.
- FE college leaders to clearly communicate their approach to working with businesses to all staff so that a consistent, organisation-wide approach is offered to employers.

### **Impact upon business competitiveness**

This thesis was an investigation into the impact leaders of FE colleges in England believed their organisations contributed towards business competitiveness. The respondents, perhaps unsurprisingly, believed that their organisations did positively impact upon business competitiveness. Perhaps more surprising was the discovery that the FE leaders' belief was difficult to evidence and was often revealed to be a perception of assumed impact rather than one that was consistently measured. The literature review discussed how perceptions could become reality in the eyes of an observer. The research methodology looked at how sometimes individuals can answer questions whereby what they say they do and what they actually do can be different (Bryman and Bell, 2007, p.282). From a knowledge perspective, it also considered how it was possible for individuals to be justified in believing propositions that were in fact false (Gettier, 1963, p.121; Zagzebski, 1994, p.73). The literature showed how measuring success of training was "still an issue that challenges the most sophisticated and progressive learning development functions" and how, very often, impact was assumed to exist, rather than truly being proven (Phillips and Phillips, 2009, p.45).

The research showed how consistent measurement and evidence of the impact FE colleges contributed towards business competitiveness was of *mixed to poor* practice. Although offering positive and negative perspectives, the majority of respondents believed that consistent measurement of impact would be of value.

The interviews provided an opportunity to investigate these responses in further depth and discuss the benefits and drawbacks. Without consistent evidence of FE college-business impact, colleges as a whole did not really understand the differences they were making. A drawback of a lack of national benchmarks was highlighted by one respondent who felt that one of the measures they considered at their college was believed to be low, but without a national benchmark, they had no way of knowing. Without agreed benchmarks, an understanding of impact was ad hoc and isolated.

Further consideration regarding the importance of understanding how an FE college could impact upon business competitiveness led some respondents to agree that a national measure of impact, if it could be created and agreed upon, would be a positive idea. It could help balance FE leaders' judgements of how they were responding to employers' needs, as well as bring relationships between businesses and FE colleges closer together. During the course of the research, respondents who were in disagreement with this idea felt it would not justify the cost for development, or become so broad a measure as to be almost meaningless, or just provide a snapshot of impact. However, positive responses did outweigh the negatives, with respondents believing it could help raise the profile of FE colleges with businesses nationally, there could be increased confidence in what the sector can and does achieve, which could lead to improved dialogue between colleges, government and employers.

A lack of an understanding of impact was also closely mirrored by a lack within FE colleges of the development of close employer relationships. Respondents acknowledged that FE colleges were not as close to businesses as they could or should be. Some suggested this was possibly because FE colleges were qualification and contract-driven, as that was how successful funded delivery was

measured. It would be difficult for this position to change without a determination on the part of FE college leaders to invest time and resources in developing these relationships, as well as a sector-wide consideration of which impact measures could be of greatest national value.

Following the research interviews, conclusions showed that communicating the value and impact of investing in business-competitive skills development would appear to be an area of maximum benefit for FE colleges, government and employers alike.

Reflecting on a national measure of impact, one respondent considered; “I think if we could get it done nationally it would be great because you’ve got probably the best minds in the country sorting out a problem which is hard.”

Considering the responses on understanding the nature of impact upon business competitiveness in light of the review of literature and research methodology, there are practical recommendations for consideration;

- FE college leaders to develop consistent ways to measure the impact of the services they provide to understand how their skills and training makes a difference to the competitiveness of their businesses. Without a national measure currently available, this could be determined by each individual college, or via groups coming together.
- FE colleges, businesses and government to have effective dialogue to consider the benefits of determining alternative ways of measuring the impact of skills and training delivery towards businesses, beyond delivery of qualifications, to understand the value the sector adds, help raise the profile of and confidence in the FE college sector, and improve the dialogue and relationships between all parties.

### **Proposed contribution to practice - summary**

This section highlighted many recommendations for practice that have been uncovered and evidenced as a result of the research. These covered the practical applications of the model that has been developed, as well as a strong focus on communications and dialogue, relationship developments and recommendations for consistent, national understanding and measurement of the impact FE colleges make towards business competitiveness. Some of these recommendations can be implemented by FE colleges individually; others would require a national commitment by the parties involved. It is believed that all are worthy of consideration.

### **Analysis of the research methods undertaken – strengths and limitations**

Following a significant literature review and a study of research methodology, primary research was undertaken in order to investigate the main research topic. The primary research involved a pilot analysis of qualitative and quantitative information via questionnaires. Reflections on this produced a refined questionnaire approach at the main research stage. This was followed up by face to face interviews with FE college leaders. A study of research methodology showed how any research design can have its limitations (Marshall and Rossman, 2011, p.76) and that no research studies are perfect (Marlow and Boone, 2007, p.295). This section will reflect upon the research methodology within this context, and consider the strengths and limitations of the research that has been undertaken.

In order to do justice to the research topic, the review of research methodology showed how it was the researcher's responsibility to choose a research approach relevant to the nature of the planned research (McMurray et al, 2004, p.44). The approach that was used accomplished this and, it is suggested, has provided contributions to knowledge and practice. The discussion, reflection and conclusions drawn from the

evidence received have been true and faithful to the research topic and have provided steps towards an understanding of knowledge on this subject.

Ethically, the research was undertaken in good faith. Respondents' identities were protected throughout and references that could have revealed identities were removed. The data findings were non-selective and are available to see section by section within the appendices. Where extracts were used within the body of the research document, they were presented as true and faithful representations of data received. Data were used to aid the evolution of the research questions through the stages undertaken and honest reflections of strengths and weaknesses of research questions were made where applicable.

It is acknowledged and recognised that the researcher had an interest in further education and the research topic prior to undertaking the research project. The researcher aimed to remove or reduce any possible bias that may have entered the study as a result of this pre-existing interest and, in line with research methodology observations, focussed this interest as a strong commitment towards pursuing the research topic. Every effort was made to reflect the contribution of source evidence and to obtain relevant, supportive and balanced viewpoints. It is believed this has been achieved within the presentation of the research findings and the transparency of the research approach.

The research aimed to expand knowledge and understanding regarding the research problem (Taylor, 2005, p.4). The research population was clearly identified.

Limitations of time and human resources (only one researcher) existed during the period the research was undertaken. An attempt to reach a meaningful sample of the research population was made. The pilot sample representation targeted 5.5% of the population and the main research targeted 37%. Limitations existed in the ability to be

able to directly reach the population as almost all were unknown to the researcher. Valid attempts to reduce this limitation were made by using representative bodies that did have contact with the population, evidenced in **Chapters 4** and **5**. It was acknowledged that greater numbers of respondents could have provided stronger reassurance regarding some of the conclusions drawn; however it was believed the approach used was reasonable in light of the limitations of resources.

As has been noted; no research is perfect. However, it is felt that the research method used was one that was fit for the purpose of answering the research question (Cohen, et al, 2007, p.78; Salkind, 2011, p.8). Several stages of research took place, reflecting and building upon themselves in order to provide a mixed-method approach to understanding and obtaining knowledge, as well as checking similar findings from different data sets. It is possible that different research approaches could have been taken and more time spent conducting the research could have obtained a wider set of responses. Nevertheless, the data findings obtained are directly from within the population sample and do present enough evidence from which to draw conclusions and make recommendations based upon their interpretation. It is reasonable to conclude that the data obtained are of themselves a valuable and rich source of information.

Limitations exist within any research study. Limitations within this research included the length of time available to undertake the research, the fact that only one researcher was involved, and a reliance on college representative bodies to aid in the selection of respondents. A positive reflection on the latter point was that it did ensure a lack of bias in choosing the respondents directly, and limitations were balanced by the wider population reach the researcher was able to extend to.

A further acknowledged limitation included the observation that the researcher worked within further education and therefore may have been biased or over-familiar with the research topic. The recognition and understanding of this, combined with an ongoing refinement of questions and the inclusion of a pilot stage of research were used as methods to help reduce this possibility.

It was acknowledged at the outset of this work that the focus would be on the viewpoints and perceptions of FE leaders. As such, direct investigation of viewpoints from business, government and other agencies fell outside the scope of this research. Whilst these areas were acknowledged and referenced within the research, the topic remained focussed on the perspectives as evidenced by FE leaders. A limitation within this work could therefore be viewed to be a lack of investigation into the viewpoints of employers, government and wider agencies to the research topic. However, rather than dilute the focus of the research topic, it is believed that this potential limitation has been offset by the clarity of viewpoints uncovered from remaining focussed, whilst also providing an ideal starting point for future researchers to build on and pursue alternative perspectives.

Recommendations for future development of this research are:

- To use the research questions on a larger (ideally full) sample of the population in order to test whether the findings and conclusions drawn within this thesis are representative interpretations of the FE college sector as a whole.
- To share the findings of this report with relevant stakeholders in order to challenge or pursue conclusions and recommendations that could help to benefit the sector, individuals, businesses and the nation.
- To consider alternative research methods that may be appropriate to use in order to pursue elements of the research in more depth or from a different perspective.

- To use elements of this research as a starting point for future further education research projects in order to widen knowledge on this or related topics.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This research was an investigation into the impact leaders of colleges of further education in England believed their organisations contributed towards business competitiveness. The information and findings from the research has been obtained directly from FE leaders working within colleges of further education in England. A greater understanding of leaders' perceptions and viewpoints on the research topic has emerged as a result. The research conducted is believed to have had a substantial benefit in terms of contributing towards knowledge as well as practice.

The theory has contributed to a research design that adds significant value to the work conducted in **Chapters 2** and **3**. A number of conclusions have been discussed within this chapter and recommendations have been made as a result. A summary is shown in **Table 31**. The work undertaken within this research clearly lays the foundations for further study, as well as the opportunity for others to dig deeper into some of the issues and recommendations raised, or explore new directions.

Businesses need a skilled workforce in order to compete, survive and thrive. For this to benefit all stakeholders involved in the provision of skills nationally, effective communication, co-ordination, partnerships and planning must take place.

Recommendations that could lead to future benefits and wider impact have been discussed and shown within this thesis. Opportunities are presented for businesses to achieve greater competitiveness if the FE sector can take advantage of them.

If further education means business, it will.



Proposed Contribution to Knowledge	Proposed Contribution to Practice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A research model has evolved and been refined and tested.</li> <li>• Incremental learning and proposed contributions to knowledge on the research topic have taken place.</li> <li>• Literature theory provided an opportunity to test responses to contrary feedback on employer perceptions of the value of training, leading to discoveries on a: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- lack of communication of the benefits of FE college training</li> <li>- poor approach to maintaining effective dialogue and relationships,</li> <li>- lack of impact measures of the business competitiveness benefits of training.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A proposed contribution to practice has been the development of a model, informed by leaders from within FE colleges, that highlights areas of strengths and weaknesses related to the research topic.</li> <li>• The model has the potential to be adapted for use at a micro-level, to assess an individual college's own effectiveness and assessment of practice and allow for development and improvement targets to be set.</li> <li>• A potential practical application was that, with minor modifications, this model also has the potential to be transferred and used across other sectors.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Practical Recommendations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• FE colleges, government, employers and relevant stakeholders to have effective dialogue and communications in true partnership to agree long-term skills development planning.</li> <li>• Government to consider the benefits and drawbacks of long-term cross-party agreements for the sector to provide strategic direction, stability and planning.</li> <li>• FE colleges to develop effective communications and strong relationships that help determine appropriate customer-focussed skills development for businesses.</li> <li>• FE colleges to consider their resource investment in developing close relationships with employers in order to provide skills and training based on an understanding of individual businesses needs.</li> <li>• FE college leaders to clearly communicate their approach to working with businesses to all staff so that a consistent, organisation-wide approach is offered to employers.</li> <li>• FE college leaders to develop consistent ways to measure the impact of the services they provide to understand how their skills and training makes a difference to the competitiveness of their businesses.</li> <li>• FE colleges, businesses and government to consider the benefits of determining alternative ways of measuring the impact of skills and training delivery towards businesses, to understand the value the sector adds, help raise the profile of and confidence in the sector and improve dialogue and relationships between all parties.</li> </ul> <p><b>Research Methodology Recommendations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To use the research questions on a larger (ideally full) sample of the population in order to test whether the findings and conclusions drawn within this thesis are representative interpretations of the FE college sector as a whole.</li> <li>• To share the findings of this report with relevant stakeholders in order to challenge or pursue conclusions and recommendations that could help to benefit the sector, individuals, businesses and the nation.</li> <li>• To consider alternative research methods that may be appropriate to use in order to pursue elements of the research in more depth or from a different perspective.</li> <li>• To use elements of this research as a starting point for future further education research projects in order to widen knowledge on this or related topics.</li> </ul>	

**Table 31**  
**Summary of recommendations**

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## **List of Appendices**

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Appendix F – Summary document from pilot research

Appendix G – AoC North West members' request

Appendix H – NEF newsletter May-June 2013

Appendix I – Website set up for NEF Innovation Institute members' information

Appendix J – 157 Group request

Appendix K – Colleges contacted via the main research stage

Appendix L – Main study quantitative questions

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Appendix P – Outline of semi-structured interview

Appendix Q – Semi-structured interview A – 12 February 2014

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Appendix S – Semi-structured interview C – 20 March 2014